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Abortion is not health care

COMMONWEAL

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Decriminalize drugs
PETER J. RIGA

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From Bed-Sty to Israel

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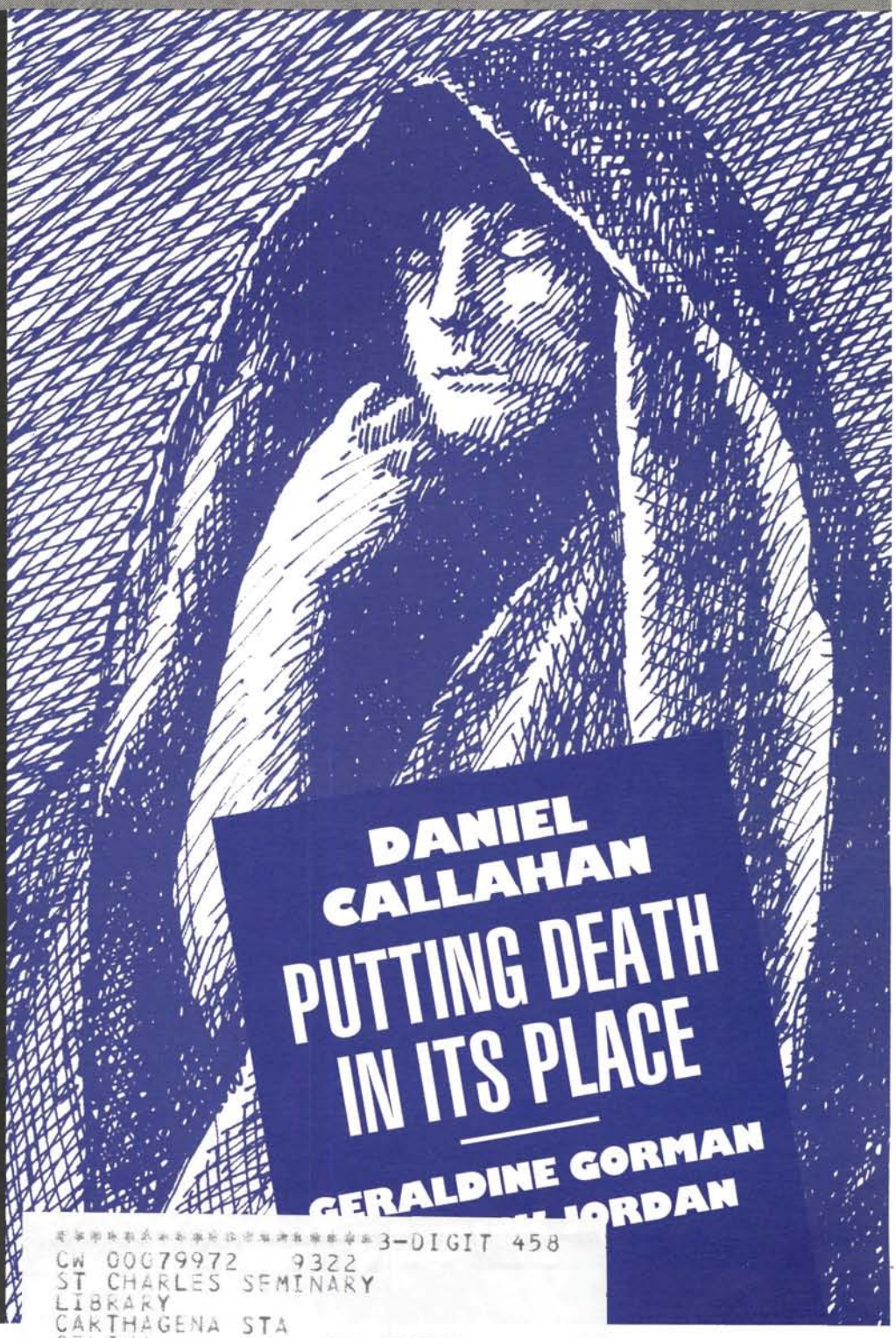

DANIEL CALLAHAN

PUTTING DEATH IN ITS PLACE

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CORRESPONDENCE

How to cope

Meridian, Miss.

To the Editors: As a pastorally concerned priest still on active duty after fifty-three years, I agree wholeheartedly with the carefully worded but clear article by Bishop Kenneth Untener (June 18) on what *Humanae vitae* has done to us, and with the bishop's last line: "We've got to do something about that."

My concern is not so much *that* the majority of Catholics disagree on the issue of artificial birth control, but *why* most of them do so—because they "could not care less." This kind of attitude makes all magisterial teaching look relative, less binding, easily "brushed away" if not found convenient, as the bishop states so well.

What if the American bishops were to publish a clear statement: "The ban on artificial birth control reflects what the magisterium right now sees as God's will. This teaching, however, is not infallible and can possibly be changed, as was the case with the church's teaching on responsible parenthood (see Pope Pius XII's address to the midwives of Italy). Hence as a rule we Catholics obey respectfully. But in case of a conflict of duties—the conflict, for example, between the duty of obeying the magisterium and the duty of keeping your marriage going without too much friction and misery—a couple (not the priest-counselor!) may make a conscientious exception."

Such a statement would not weaken but rather strengthen the authority of the magisterium, and it would "do something" about the damaging situation we are in. An issue for the next meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops? JOHN KERSTEN, S.V.D.

Not of one mind

New York, N.Y.

To the Editors: Paul Jaskunas's account ["Migrating Anglo-Catholics," June 4] of the distress many Anglo-Catholics are suffering as a result of the Church of England's decision to ordain women priests fails to recognize that at least some Anglo-Catholics are quite comfortable with Anglicanism's growing acceptance of women in the priesthood.

In my Anglo-Catholic parish, Saint Ignatius of Antioch in New York City, a woman priest has for several years celebrated Mass, preached, and heard confessions. A handful of old guard parishioners transferred out, most of them, ironically, winding up in a parish that has just decided to drop its exclusion of women at the altar. On the other hand, we have attracted at least an equal number of worshipers who appreciate our traditional ways, but are put off by the misogynist attitudes of some of our coreligionists.

You may be interested to know that, in the American Episcopal church at least, the majority of our religious communities, of both men and women, support the ordination of women, with some of the orders of sisters providing a fair number of priestly vocations. Who are more legitimate Anglo-Catholics than these monastics?

Anglo-Catholics who support the ordination of women do so on the same grounds as those Roman Catholics who are campaigning on the issue. We fail to see any genuine scriptural reasons for relegating women to a second-class position in the church, and believe that a centuries'-old practice that is wrong is not made right because it is centuries old.

Some of the opponents of women priests in my church say that, for the sake of ecumenism, Anglicans should not have changed until other branches of the Catholic church were also ready to make the same move. This argument fails to understand how change happens in the real world. It may be that it has become the vocation of Anglicans to lead the way on this for all Catholics and that, by the time we're ready for reunion, we will all accept the full citizenship of women in the Body of Christ.

ANTONIO RAMIREZ

Assumptions at war

Montgomery, Ala.

To the Editors: Since the Catholic church does not ordain women, is it sexist? Part of the difficulty in debating this question, much discussed in your pages, is that opponents do not share the same set of assumptions. I believe the conflicting assumptions are:

1. The American ideal of *self*-autonomy in contrast with the traditional ideal of membership in a community which aims for a *common* good.

2. A society which accepts the Marxist notion that nature is not normative and that we are not to interpret the world so much as to change it, versus the natural law tradition of the church.

3. Similarly, the feminist assumption that androgyny is the ideal and that the increasing equivalence of sexual roles is a sign of progress, as opposed to the belief that there are substantive differences between male and female.

4. A *functional* definition of equality: "I am equal only if I can do what others are eligible to do"—versus an *ontological* definition: "I am equal because of who I am."

These differences directly influence the debate. If, for example, I understand equal-

(Continued on page 30)

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COMMONWEAL

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Publisher: Edward S. Skillin

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Health reform at risk

Abortion is not health care. That is the simplest—and some might say the most simpleminded—argument against including abortion procedures in the health-care package that will make its way through Congress this fall. The rejoinders are obvious: abortion saves the lives of some women; by law it must be performed by a physician; and it routinely takes place in medical settings with the requisite tools, standards of hygiene, and after-care. If this isn't a species of "health care," what is?

But consider: only a minuscule number of abortions are performed to save the life of the mother; most are elective procedures, elected often for reasons that have nothing to do with the health of the mother—even broadly defined. Most Americans recognize this, and when asked in public opinion polls, most do not approve of abortions chosen for economic and social reasons, or for solely personal reasons.

Furthermore, most Americans do not think that tax dollars should be used to pay for abortions; 72 percent say that an abortion should be paid for by the woman who wants it; only 23 percent favor covering abortion as part of President Bill Clinton's basic health plan (*New York Times*/CBS Poll, March 1993). This view now prevails at the federal level; current legislation prohibits the use of Medicaid funds for abortion except to save the life of the mother (a provision that may be broadened in the current budget to include rape and incest). This exclusion rests on the conviction that taxpayers should not be asked to pay for abortions that a great many of them believe to be morally wrong.

J.Bryan Hehir, in a speech to the Catholic Health Association, captures the current problem exactly: Including abortion in health-care legislation, he says, is "to take the broadest social policy initiative we've had in forty years and to join it with the most controversial public policy issue we've had in twenty years."

Over the next several months, many arguments—pro and con, pragmatic and principled—will be advanced on this issue. The most critical pragmatic argument against inclusion, implied by Hehir's comment, is that the health-care bill faces fierce opposition if abortion is included, indeed may fail to pass. The country desperately needs health-care reform and a reform bill desperately needs every friend it can muster. The United States Catholic Conference is one friend; the Catholic Health Association, representing some 1600 hospitals, is another. Both have long supported a national health-care policy, both are opposed to including abortion. Many people, including some Catholics, will dismiss this opposition as another regrettable example of Catholic intransigence on abortion, even though, as the polls show, large numbers of non-Catholics also oppose including abortion.

Quite apart from whether one believes that all, most, some, or no abortions are morally tolerable, we are convinced that there is more to be said against requiring all of us through our taxes to pay for abortions. Including abortion as part of a health-

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care package would sanction a practice that means the taking of human life. Yes, some would say that this is not "protectable" human life; others would agree with the Supreme Court that this is a matter best left to the choice of the woman; still others would continue to call abortion a fundamental right. In the issue at hand, these objections are beside the point. In striking down state laws against abortion, *Roe* v. *Wade* drew the "right" to abortion from the penumbra of privacy and argued that the state had no interest in fetal life before viability. Though we have never been persuaded by the constitutional reasoning that located this decision in a right to privacy, that line of reasoning currently stands as the law of the land. And as long as it stands, it brings with it a compelling argument against tax-supported subsidies for abortions which would force everyone to pay for them through the government's taxing power.

If the decision rests with the individual, so should the cost. "Mainstreaming" abortion by mandating it as part of a national health-care package would mean that none of us would be free of moral complicity in a matter over which none of us has a right to intervene or intercede. To insist on its inclusion imposes on the body politic a levy that will further erode the common good, encourage ever greater contempt for government, and inevitably invite a movement for conscientious tax objection.

NOTEBOOK

WRESTLING STILL

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS & COUNTING

Without doubt, the papal encyclical that has had the most effect on my life is Paul VI's *Humanae vitae*. I wish it weren't so.

I remember, with atypical clarity, the day the encyclical was published in 1968. It was a hot July day in New York, and as I read the *Times* account and then excerpts from the encyclical itself, I felt as if I were being caught hold of by something akin to Jacob's angel. I knew instinctively that I had come up against something mysterious, something that was going to prove as intrusive, unrelenting, and, I feared rightly, ultimately maiming as Jacob's nemesis. And so it has been.

At the time, I had just completed my tenth year in the seminary and had three more to go before ordination. It wasn't as if ordination were a foregone conclusion, however. I wasn't entirely clear on either the best way to try to live the gospel, or whether I was a fit candidate for a life of celibacy. In the end, it was these personal questions, not *Humanae vitae*, that led to my leaving the seminary. Nonetheless, it was on first reading the encyclical that I knew I probably could not continue on to ordination because I could not officially represent such a teaching.

In keeping with *Commonweal*'s usual schedule, only one issue is published each month during July and August. The next issue will be dated August 13.

Leaving the seminary a year later proved to be the easy part. It was only later, as a husband, that the real wrestling began. For while my wife, Kathleen, and I didn't and don't subscribe to the encyclical's reasoning on the immorality of artificial birth control, over the last twenty years we have tried, in faith, to abide by the papal teaching. I say "in faith" because I don't think there is any other logic for explaining why we try to live by a teaching we cannot otherwise adequately explain or defend.

When we were going through marriage preparations, the priest—who, it turned out, left the priesthood not long afterward to marry—dismissed the encyclical and instructed us that it was entirely up to us and to our consciences to determine the moral weight *Humanae vitae* would have in our lives. But we soon found that his nonchalance didn't really fit our own questions. It was not that we lived on a diet of papal bulls. We were not unfamiliar with civil disobedience, questioned the pope's explanations of biology, were aware of pressing demographic and feminist concerns, and both had some measure of theological schooling. But even though we felt the encyclical's logic was faulty, we came to sense a trust for its teachings rather than those of our peripatetic priest. The pope had made a telling point in writing that "the pastors of the church enjoy a special light of the Holy Spirit in teaching the truth. And this, *rather than the arguments they put forward*, is why you are bound to such obedience" (italics added).

For me—and this has a lot more to do with intuition than with logic—Paul VI got the explanations and the details wrong, but he got the heart of the matter—about the sacredness, responsibility for, and beauty of sexuality—right. He has proven to be prophetic, and tragically so, concerning respect for life and the desacralization of sex. Still, if a prophet, he was a Cassandra whose warnings only helped make the final state of matters worse than they had been before.

That the other "pastors" of the church—not to mention a legion of conscientious moral theologians—were divided (and still are) on the morality of artificial birth control is, for me, a convincing argument that a less rigorous interpretation of the encyclical's moral prohibitions is entirely legitimate. (I am inclined to agree with the rabbinic concept that "restrictions imposed upon the populace that the majority cannot endure are not to be levied.") And then there is still the almost embarrassing but inescapable conclusion that those who had formalized the encyclical were hardly rabbis with wives. The pope and his secretaries didn't have a clue as to what it is actually like to sleep with one's spouse each night; not an inkling as to what constitutes what might be called the "eucharistic" elements of marriage.

For my part, I think the teaching of Vatican II (*see*, *Gaudium et spes*, nos. 47-52) is not only useful but superior to that of *Humanae vitae*. We should emphasize it and go on. Still, *Humanae vitae* is not without a degree of beauty and substance, and not without some power to challenge and move con-

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sciences. It spelled out something of the costliness of a certain form of discipleship, and pointed out correctly the Catholic understanding that all sexual acts, whether in private and between whomever, have an effect on the whole community. It said something necessary about chasteness, modesty, the ends of marriage, and the ability to "die to oneself," all of which bespeak genuine religion and have something to do with how we will come to see the face of God (Matt. 5:8).

In commenting on the Orthodox Jewish observance of *niddah*—the traditional laws of family purity, which include a significant period each month of sexual abstinence on the part of married couples—Blu Greenberg (*On Women and Judaism*) writes that among Orthodox Jews the practice of *niddah* remains relatively intact today. "And although we cannot understand it by means of logic, it [the discipline imposed by *niddah*] obviously serves a deep human need." But traditional Jewish observance has endured—at least among a minority of Jews—because it has been able to adapt. According to Greenberg, Judaism has been able to do so because it "interprets and reflects reality, not just tradition."

For our part, Kathleen and I are still wrestling with the "angel" *Humanae vitae* thrust into our lives. Looking back—and forward—we still hope that one day the church's pastors will learn some of the modesty and the flexibility of their rabbinic counterparts. To place burdens too heavy on the shoulders of others, after all, has merited divine censure. PATRICK JORDAN

REPORT ON INDIA

RECONCEIVING A NATION

WHO CONTROLS THE PAST...

India is simultaneously among the oldest and youngest of places. As a civilization, it can claim a past that stretches back thousands of years. But as a modern nation-state, it is not even half-a-century old—a mere infant among the members of the world community—and still very much in search of its own sense of self.

India's present identity depends heavily on its image of its past. Nations, like individuals, are defined by what they think they once were. But the past, it may also be noted, is never what it used to be. The recollection of history, by individuals and by nations, is constantly updated and revised by the ever-changing needs of the present. We remember what we want to, forget what we no longer find useful, and, often enough, fabricate what we wish had been.

Over the last several years, India's past has become a contested battleground in an ideological war which has produced very corporeal casualties. Competing and clashing visions of history have played a crucial role in a sometimes deadly dispute about the present and future of the world's second most populous nation.

Since gaining its independence in 1947, India has constitutionally defined itself as a "sovereign, democratic, and secular republic." With a current population of 850 million people comprised of a bewildering variety of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious groups, modern India has been proud of its status as the largest pluralistic and secular democracy in the world.

But over the last decade a growing and militant faction within the Hindu majority has challenged some of the basic assumptions of India's self-identity. One of these is secularism, a legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964). Critics say secularism has served as a sham for minority appeasement and fostered craven pandering by politicians to "vote banks" of grateful Muslims. Hindus, many complain, have become disadvantaged in their own country.

The conservative Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), riding this wave of Hindu resentment and religious nationalism, has moved in a few short years from the political fringe to its present position as the major opposition party to the ruling Congress party. It has done so, in part, by offering a new interpretation of India's past.

India, insists the BJP, is a "Hindu nation" and always has been. L. K. Advani, one of the principal leaders of the BJP, has suggested that Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs living in India be referred to as "Mohammadi Hindus," "Christian Hindus," and "Sikh Hindus" in order to emphasize the ancient and persisting Hindu character of the Indian nation-state. This proposition has not gone over well with India's 100 million Muslims, who are also now blamed for the supposed anti-Hindu acts of Mughal emperors who ruled north India some four or five hundred years ago.

To reinvent the present, it helps to reinterpret the past. Some Hindu activists have been hard at work doing just that. It was the BJP and its affiliated organizations who were responsible for stirring up the religious fervor that resulted in last December's destruction of a sixteenth-century Muslim mosque in Ayodhya by a crowd of Hindu fanatics. Ayodhya, it is claimed, is the actual nativity site of the Hindu god Rama, born, according to BJP historians, some time during or before the third millennium B.C. In the sixteenth century, or so the story goes, the Islamic ruler Babur destroyed the Hindu temple which had existed at Ayodhya since time immemorial, and erected on its ruins a mosque. It was this structure that was pulled down in six hours, by hand, by thousands of Hindu nationalists on December 6, 1992.

The BJP has historians and archaeologists who provide official validation of its claims. A certain Sudha Malaiya, described in a press release as a "young and bright art historian," told the nation about the remarkable archaeological finds she personally uncovered in the rubble on the day the Ayodhya mosque was destroyed. The evidence—including pillars from the ancient Hindu temple which had, astonishingly, been left wholly intact and a perfectly preserved large buff sandstone slab bearing inscriptions in Sanskrit—confirmed all the main points of the BJP's version of Ayodhya's past.

The miraculous nature of these finds was immediately

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noted and their authenticity disputed by experts of a more secular bent. Especially critical were those who had worked for years on systematic archaeological excavations which had turned up nothing that remotely suggested that the site held such antiquarian wonders and indisputable proof for religious beliefs. Professor B. B. Lal, the director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India, had conducted one such excavation in the '70s and found absolutely no evidence of any preexisting Hindu temple at the site.

Historians at the prestigious, left-leaning Jawaharlal Nehru University have also joined the fray, publishing pamphlets and newspaper articles in an attempt to discredit the BJP account of Ayodhya's past. Hindu extremists, for their part, have broadened their efforts and distributed a list of 3,000 sites across the country where, they say, Muslim emperors usurped sacred Hindu ground. Some of these could well become the Ayodhyas of the future. Others have gone so far as to claim that the Taj Mahal itself was not built by a Mughal emperor to commemorate his wife but was, in fact, a pre-Islamic Hindu monument appropriated later by Muslim aggrandizers.

The battle for India's history is also being fought in elementary and high schools. Textbooks in the states controlled by the BJP have been rewritten so as to glorify the "Hindu past," excoriate the policies of the "Muslim invaders," rename Indian cities and other geographical locales, and reenvision the relationship between the Hindu religion and Indian national identity and citizenship.

India's self-identity pivots on how it understands its past, and that past is currently disputed. How this young nation-state conceives of, or reconceives, its own history will determine whether India will survive as the world's largest secular democracy, or enter the new millennium as the newest, and by far the most populous, of the world's theocracies. BRIAN K. SMITH

Brian K. Smith is professor of religious studies and history at the University of California at Riverside.

REPORT FROM THE FRONT LINES

THE DRUG WAR IS A CRIME

LET'S TRY DECRIMINALIZATION

I practice law in the criminal courts of Harris County, Texas. I am constantly amazed that over half of the prisoners in the justice system are black and another third are Mexican or other minorities. All are poor. More than half of them are in prison because of drug-related crimes.

There are few whites in this group because drug crimes (possession, use, distribution, theft-robbery to get money for a habit, etc.) are mostly crimes of poor people, and whites have the money to buy drugs (legal and illegal), to pay for good lawyers, or to afford rehab centers. Moreover, the real drug of choice in the white community is alcohol. It is legal, available, and there are many programs to deal with its negative effects. To me it is shameful and irrational that users of cocaine and heroin are labeled criminals and go to jail—with almost no hope of therapy or rehab—while the users of the powerful drug alcohol are considered sick (alcoholics) and given therapy.

There are deep social causes for illegal drug use which our present law-enforcement strategy does almost nothing to alleviate. Up to 1980, social programs in the cities were beginning to show some progress, but with the Reagan administration's singular emphasis on law and order, these were radically curtailed. However, statistics from the past twelve years on what came to be known as "the war on drugs" tell a grim tale. While over $100 billion was spent on the effort—an eightfold monetary increase—a 1990 report of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Drug Enforcement Administration of the Department of Justice tells us that there are today 6 million hard-core, illegal-drug users, double the estimate in 1980. All told, each year 14 million Americans use illegal drugs for one reason or another. They spend about $50 billion on marijuana, cocaine, crack, heroin, and hallucinogens. While the number of deaths and murders connected to illegal drugs has soared to some 21,000 a year (they account for the highest number of deaths among minorities under the age of thirty-five), the figure nonetheless remains smaller that the number of deaths each year which result from drunk driving (22,000).

If the war on drugs proves anything, it is that its emphasis on law enforcement—on the supply-side rather than the demand-side—has been a colossal failure. Yet the appointment of Lee P. Brown to a cabinet-level position as the Clinton administration's first director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy does not indicate a shift in emphasis. Brown's background is in law enforcement (he has headed police departments in New York, Atlanta, and Houston), and the initial Clinton budget ($13 billion) seems to be a carryover of previous spending patterns: the bulk of the money is earmarked for law enforcement, surveillance, prison construction, and border patrols, rather than education and rehabilitation. If we were to legalize and control the use of illegal drugs, we could make some significant progress. For starters, we could cut the prison population by more than half, thereby raising vast sums of money for proper law enforcement *and* therapy for those addicted. At present, treatment is available for only about 15 percent of the nation's drug addicts. The funding is just not there. Yet we are now spending about $159 a day to house a prisoner in one of our overcrowded jails. Instead of seeking to build more jails at enormous costs, we should apply a fraction of that money to drug rehab centers, a proven method of helping people get off drugs.

One of the reasons rampant crime is associated with drugs is the drug trade's great profitability. The money involved is so ready, so substantial, that dealers can always find another recruit to take the place of someone who has just been caught. For those imprisoned, for use or for dealing, incarceration does little more than harden them. It certainly doesn't rehabilitate them. They come out of prison only to involve themselves again, and this in turn accounts for the system's high recidivism rates.

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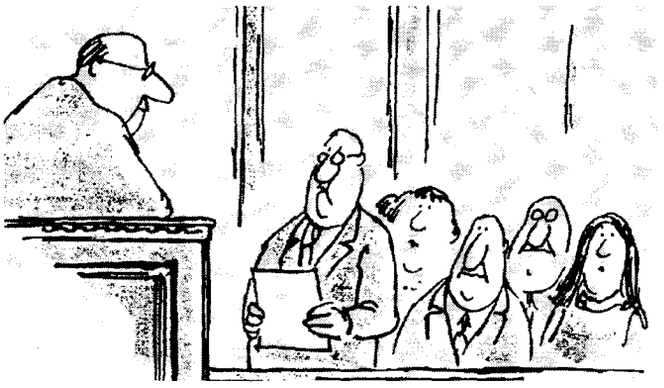
These facts are well known and yet we refuse to face them. We keep on going back to law enforcement and punishment, a costly and consistent failure. Fed up with mandatory sentencing guidelines, two prominent federal judges in New York recently refused to hear drug-related cases (*New York Times,* April 17). As another federal judge, Robert W. Swett, told the *Times*, "The present policy of trying to prohibit the use of drugs through the use of criminal law is a mistake."

Let me hasten to say that neither the legalization of drugs nor the mere availability of treatment/rehabilitation would cure the root causes of their widespread use. In themselves, these are only palliatives. The real solution for challenging and changing the grip of the drug culture lies in people having some sense of hope for their future. A study in the 1950s traced adolescent heroin addiction in New York City. It found that the majority of users were from poor neighborhoods. Since then, numerous other studies have established the link between deprivation and drug use. The problem is not one of race, but of class and the sense of possibility.

Nevertheless, I think the time has come to legalize drugs. The legalization I envision would not be without regulation. Those who drive while under the influence of drugs would be severely dealt with—much as we do with those who drink and drive. Thanks to such groups as MADD, laws related to drunken driving have become tighter and more strictly enforced. We must do the same with other drugs. Part of the money from the legal sale of these drugs could be allocated for education and rehabilitation, much as we do with tax money from alcohol sales and from gambling.

The real solution to drug addiction lies in individuals' heightened awareness of the destructiveness of drugs, and in self-pride programs for society's "have-nots." The United States has cut back drastically on its alcohol and tobacco consumption because people have become aware that even in moderation these legal products are dangerous. The same thing must be done for other drugs. Pragmatically, the legal and controlled sale of drugs would not only reduce crime but channel valuable resources into treatment. It is a risk, but given the alternatives, the risk is worth taking.



"Your Honor, we find the defendant guilty, the court room jammed, the docket overloaded, the calendar crowded, the jails full, the system appalling, but, what can you do?"

Drug legalization in England and Holland has had mixed results. While there has been a slight increase in drug use in those countries, the number of crimes associated with drugs has decreased. In the U.S. there are now eleven states which have decriminalized the personal use of marijuana. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (1992), there has been no increase in its use in those states.

Clearly, there will be some increase in drug use if drugs are made legal and accessible at a reasonable price. Yet the benefits of legalization will outweigh the negatives: less crime, illegal profits, more resources available for greater rehabilitation efforts, fewer jail cells and prisoners, better utilization of law enforcement personnel, greater respect for law, fewer corrupted policemen, and fewer deaths from impure substances. Furthermore, taxes from these legalized drugs will fund treatment centers and educational outreach. If we can distribute condoms and clean needles to control the spread of disease, why can't we bring ourselves to distribute drugs cheaply and legally? The same arguments about cause and effect ought to be made here as well.

PETER J. RIGA

Peter J. Riga, a free-lance writer and a theologian, is an attorney in private practice in Houston, Texas.

OF SEVERAL MINDS Abigail McCarthy

FROM BED-STY TO ISRAEL

BLACK TEENS ON A KIBBUTZ

It is still hard for Americans to admit that things are better, or are done better, in other countries, other cultures. Yet we bump into the evidence every day in the pages of our newspapers. Take, for example, the repeated statistics demonstrating that where the sale of guns is controlled, as in England, the number of homicides is minimal compared to ours. Or the repetition in the current health-care debates that our Canadian neighbors across the border do not share our fears of financially crippling illness because the universal, single-payer, health-care system there protects them in a way which most Canadian citizens find very satisfactory.

We have heard, in an abstract way, that many of our citizens live in third-world conditions. It is a shock, nevertheless, to learn that the French medical relief organization, Doctors of the World, which sends volunteers to underdeveloped nations like Somalia and Ethiopia, also has an affiliate in New York City. Its volunteers work in parts of the city where people do not have even the most basic medical care. According to one of the volunteers, Dr. Nadia Marsh, the people there are worse off than the poor of the third world

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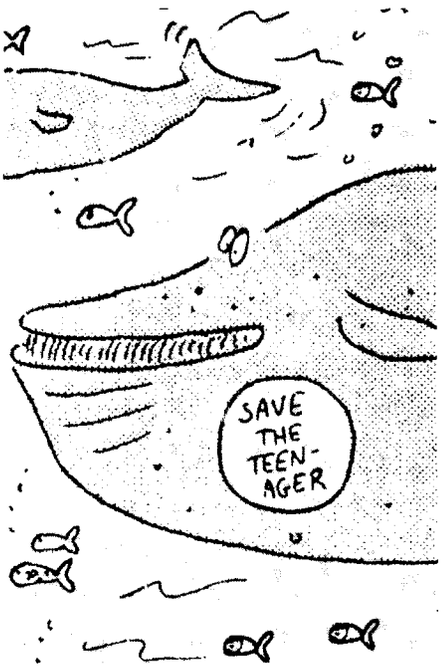

because they do not have the extended families which provide a sense of security for third-world people (*New York Times*, May 4, 1993).

It is upsetting, too, that the people of Israeli kibbutz communities are taking in troubled black teen-agers from places like Bedford-Stuyvesant and giving them the acceptance and sense of family they cannot find here. The striking and heart-warming film, *Blacks to the Promised Land*, made by Madeleine Ali, an African-American who is a convert to Judaism, is making the rounds of small theaters. It documents the experience of one group of such teen-agers and their hosts. It is a film all Americans should see, if for no other reason than to learn how attractive, engaging, and "normal" these—our own—teen-agers can be.

They may walk the mean streets of "Bed-Sty" and struggle in a special school. They may admit to having "boosted" (shop-lifted), or having been truants for months at a time, but they are lively and humorous and, in their serious moments, admit to a constant yearning for a better life and a better world.

In the documentary itself the viewer is left wondering as to how these students from the Bedford-Stuyvesant Street Academy were selected. They are obviously a superior group. They express themselves well in standard English. They are well-dressed. The two mothers interviewed seem to have an intelligent and realistic understanding of their children's lives.

Inquiry revealed that Stewart Bialer, a teacher at the academy, himself Jewish, had initiated the project. He was concerned that his students had no hobbies, did nothing constructive to speak of, and were passive recipients of the culture conveyed to them via film, music, and television. They needed immersion, he thought, in another culture to learn new habits and get perspective on their lives.

The hardest part of getting the project under way, he found, was not fighting through the school bureaucracy, but selecting the students. They had to be stable and independent enough to sustain the experience. They had to be warm toward each other and willing to share. His selection seems to have been flawless.

The stereotypes against which these students must contend are illuminated again and again in the opening scenes of the documentary. Television interviewers lay stress on the seamy sides of their backgrounds—over and over. "At first it was exciting...like, wow...we're going to be on television...but after a while it got boring," says one girl, "They were always in your face," implying, she added, that the students were potential criminals, and describing them as typical products of a dangerous neighborhood.

There are scenes, too, in which the Israeli teen-agers awaiting the Bed-Sty students' coming express concern. One boy says that he expects them to be very different because they come from a place of shooting and drug-dealing—"that's the world they know." (It is interesting that, in the retrospective scenes at the end of the film, this same boy implicitly denies having entertained such concerns himself and attributes such suspicious expectations to his elders.)

The black teen-agers entertain stereotypes of their own. They admit to knowing no Jews and expecting the people of the kibbutz to be like the Hasidim, "smelly, and wearing funny hats and clothes." (One boy shows the "stash" with which he has provided against deprivation—candy bars and cookies hidden under a coverlet, and soft drinks stored in his locker—evidently brought all the way from home.) They expect the whole country of Israel to be a desert and are surprised and struck by the natural beauty surrounding the kibbutz—Kibbutz Levahot-Habashan near the Golan Heights.

From the very first encounter the relationship between the students and the members of the kibbutz is heart-warming. The students, without exception, marvel at their unconditional acceptance. "It was never like—oh, he's black, you know," says one of them.

For their part the students fit into their temporary Israeli families with ease, meeting welcome with clear affection. "In the dining room," an enthusiastic Israeli woman said, "there were always six or seven calling me 'Mom.'"

It is never explicit but it is apparent that the black teen-agers come from a culture where fathers are in short supply. Their response to their Israeli "fathers" is very moving. They are especially fond of George, the patriarch of the Kibbutz-Habasham. And they tell interviewers that their teacher, Bialer, is "like a father" to them.

Their response to early rising and the work tasks to which they are assigned is not so affirmative but they adapt, with groaning and grumbling and eventually with high spirits. Midway in their three-months' stay, as was only to be expected, they were rebelling against the food and the confinement and "dailiness" of kibbutz living. But in the end they all left with regret.

They took away an appreciation of work and cooperation and an understanding of what supportive family life could be. But what is important for us to know is that they brought much with them—vitality and a sense of fun and celebration which caused the Israeli teen-agers to mourn their going—"It will be so dull without them." They also brought, unsuspected even to themselves, a deep well-spring of faith. One of the most touching of scenes is that of their tearful response "to walking where Jesus walked," when they were taken on a tour to the Garden of Gethsemane.

Why did they have to go 5,000 miles away to find white acceptance? Why do we need this film to learn to know and love them? □

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WHICH ABORTION BILL?

WATCH KENNEDY

During the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton promised passage of the Freedom of Choice Act, which would establish a woman's right to an abortion by statute. Yet despite its high profile, the Freedom of Choice Act is probably not the prochoice bill that will make it through Congress this year. A more likely legislative scenario is that some version of the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, propelled by the murder this past March of Dr. David Gunn in Pensacola Florida, will reach the floor of Congress despite its potential constitutional problems.

The more controversial Freedom of Choice Act, which was introduced when it seemed that the Supreme Court might overturn *Roe* v. *Wade*, has been delayed in the Senate because supporters fear the attachment of certain "weakening" amendments, such as proposals that call for parental notification and a twenty-four-hour waiting period. In fact, in validating portions of Pennsylvania's abortion law, the Supreme Court in June 1992 upheld such requirements in *Casey* v. *Planned Parenthood*. Because the Freedom of Choice Act is being bottled up by its own supporters, the Freedom of Access Act seems to be the most likely prochoice bill to be considered this Congress.

The Freedom of Access Act of 1993 (S.636) creates criminal penalties and civil redress against "whoever by force or threat of force or by physical obstruction, intentionally injures, intimidates, or interferes with or attempts to injure, intimidate or interfere with any person" seeking to obtain or provide abortion services. The language of the bill raises judicial questions that are most properly the concern of the Senate Judiciary Committee. But it has been carefully crafted so that it falls instead under the jurisdiction of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, of which Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) is the chairman.

It is common knowledge on Capitol Hill that the legislation was drafted in such a way so as to allow Senator Kennedy to control its course through the Senate. Kennedy's committee held hearings in May; some time later this summer or in the fall, the Freedom of Access bill will be marked-up in his committee and passed through to the full Senate for a vote. Why did Kennedy want the bill to go through his committee, even though he also serves on the Senate Judiciary Committee? And what chance does the bill have in Congress?

It is very likely that Kennedy wanted the bill in the Labor and Human Resources Committee to assure solid Democratic support and that he was able to bring it there by framing the issue as a public health concern, rather than a judicial or constitutional one. Kennedy is able to move legislation in and out of his committee with a certain dispatch because, with ten Democrats and seven Republicans on the committee (two of whom usually side with the Democrats on social issues), he has the votes to do just about anything. On the other hand, Senator Joseph Biden (D-Md.), who chairs the Senate Judiciary Committee, would not automatically step in line with Kennedy and might be more concerned about the constitutional implications of legislation that attempts to curtail the expression of a particular viewpoint simply because it has the effect of hindering access to abortion.

Kennedy's staff argues that though they have adequate support in the Judiciary Committee, especially from new members Senator Carol Moseley Braun (D-Ill.) and Senator Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.), their parliamentary maneuvers, rather than trying to assure its passage, have more to do with Kennedy's view that the issues addressed in the bill deserve high priority and quick consideration.

When compared to the House version, the Senate bill seems more likely of passage. The House bill (H.R. 796), in the view of one Senate staffer, is "off the charts" on constitutional questions. As introduced, it would prohibit a person "with intent to prevent or discourage any person from obtaining reproductive health services from physically [obstructing, hindering, or impeding] the ingress or egress of another to a medical facility." This language does not even mention force or threat of force and is clearly meant to silence anti-abortion protesters since explicit exception is made for labor disputes. Thus it is clear that what is being prohibited is not conduct that is objectively and inherently harmful, such as the use of force, but conduct motivated by the desire to discourage abortion.

The Senate bill is not so aggressively unconstitutional: it targets conduct that is harmful, such as the use of force or threat of force, as well as "physical obstruction" motivated by a desire to stop abortion.

Supporters of the Freedom of Access bill defend its constitutionality by pointing to other laws that prohibit behavior motivated by certain views. For example, antidiscrimination laws make it illegal for an employer to fire someone, if the reason for doing so is based on the employer's view of the race, gender, or religion of the worker. Supporters also cite federal law (18 USC section 245), which prohibits the use of force or the threat of force that interferes

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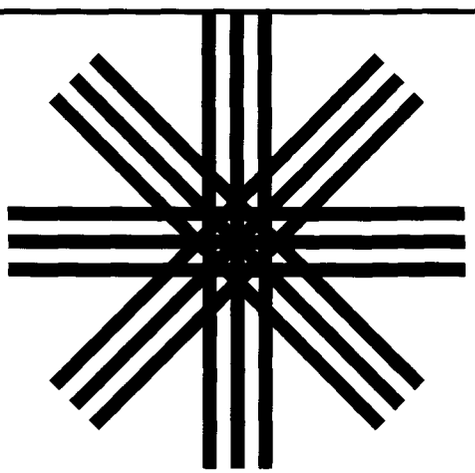
with a person's right to vote.

Very few reasonable people would argue that opponents of abortion have a right to use force or the threat of force to get their point across. The problem with the Freedom of Access bill is that it seems to prohibit forms of behavior that, but for the viewpoint motivating it, would not be regarded as illegal or objectionable. So, for example, a woman who sits in the doorway of an abortion clinic praying the rosary and praying for an end to abortion will violate the law if this bill passes. So would a mother standing in the doorway of her home pleading with her daughter to talk to her about the decision she has made to have an abortion. With these examples, critics of the bill argue that it fails to treat abortion protests equally: a prochoicer who stands in the way of a prolife marcher, yelling threatening remarks and refusing to move, does not violate this law. Activity that is otherwise protected by the First Amendment's speech clause is thus restricted only when that speech communicates an opposition to abortion. (June 23: As the bill moves to the Senate floor, revisions have been made (1) to exempt parents or a legal guardian from the penalties or civil remedies; and (2) to define narrowly words such as "intimidate," "interfere with," and "physical obstruction.")

Harvard law professor Lawrence Tribe, who testified before Kennedy's committee, argues that such examples reveal less about the weaknesses of the bill's language than they do about the ability of any extreme hypothetical to undermine a sound principle. But the above examples are not extreme hypotheticals. In fact, they are probably rather common expressions both by people who have great moral difficulty accepting abortion as well as by people who have great moral difficulty with government's interference in the right of a woman to choose.

Despite these constitutional questions, the Senate bill looks as though it may have enough support for passage. No Senator wants to be seen as being "proviolence." If the bill is successfully couched in these terms, opponents will have difficulty summoning the votes to prevent its consideration. Even Senator Dan Coats (R-Ind.), a prolife Republican and member of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, says he supports the intent of the legislation though he has questions about the way it is drafted. Whether those questions will be addressed in committee mark-up or on the Senate floor remains to be seen.

Opponents of the Freedom of Access bill need to be ready both to make the constitutional arguments against its targeted approach and to amend it to correct its deficiencies. My guess is that some modified version of the Senate bill will make it to the president's desk during this Congress. It will be unfortunate, however, if the pressure to act unequivocally against the objectionable violence that has characterized some prolife demonstrations, prevents serious attention to the problems with the Senate and, most especially, the House bill as they are now written. □



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Deadline: October 1, 1993. Announcement of Prize: December 17, 1993. The prize-winning essay will be published in COMMONWEAL's January 14, 1994, issue. This essay will become the property of the Graymoor Ecumenical Institute. All other essays will be returned to their authors after January 1.

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CRAMMING FOR YOUR FINALS

MAKE DEATH A PART OF LIFE

DANIEL CALLAHAN

Although I did not understand it at the time, when my longtime friend asked me to visit him at his farm during my summer vacation his purpose was almost surely to pull together the strands of our relationship over the years and, without directly letting me know it, to say good-by. I had not seen him for a few years, and his altered appearance was unsettling—a thin and wasted body, and a face that showed pain as his constant companion. He looked older than his seventy years. We talked, but not about his illness, much less his coming death. When I tried to do that, he changed the subject—not by way of evasion, I came to realize, but out of a fear felt by many who have been ill a long time, that they will seem caught in self-pity, soon wearing out our solicitude.

We talked instead the way we had always talked, about what we were thinking and feeling and about our plans for the future. He was, I could see in retrospect, vague about his plans. A few months later, he died; his was the kind of death I have recently been working to understand and describe. As his wife wrote afterward, "On the day that turned out to be his last, he told us it was time to die, asked us not to prolong his life but to let him go. We sent him along with aching love and blessing on his journey, and he left us, quietly and peacefully—as beautiful and noble and spiritual in death as he was in life."

How could someone in such pain die that way, I had to ask myself? A more general question also came to mind. What, I wondered, have been the common traits of those people whose peaceful deaths I have seen or heard about? One point stands out: Their peaceful death did not seem a matter of good fortune only. They did not die differently from the way they had lived. It was as if they gathered into one culminating moment all those personal traits and virtues that had served them well in life. Some were in pain and some were not. In some cases their death was premature, in some cases not. What mattered in each case, as far as I could see, was what they made of their situation.

They did not treat their dying as bad luck, but simply the way things were. They accepted their death, bowing without complaint to its coming, some for religious reasons and some for reasons of other kinds. They did not think a loss of control of their bodies and their lives meant a loss of dignity and self-respect. If they required a bedpan and the humiliation of a public display of their wastes, they just put up with that. If there was pain, they endured it. If there was sorrow, they did not pour it on themselves. They grieved for those who would have to bear their loss. They sought to put those around them at ease, anxious not to carry others down with them. They took their leave, making it a point to see their friends, even if they did not always say why. They were conscious and lucid almost until the end, in part because they had asked that their medical treatment be stopped earlier than it might have been.

Most of all, I sensed, they put death in its place, downplaying its importance and drama. They saw that it would be a greater blow to others than to themselves. They had reconciled them-

"Turns eighty, and right away it's 'odes to autumn.'"

DANIEL CALLAHAN *is director of the Hastings Center.* *Copyright © 1993 by Daniel Callahan. From the forthcoming book* The Troubled Dream of Life *by Daniel Callahan to be published by Simon & Schuster, Inc. Printed by permission.*

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selves to their end but knew this would be harder for others. One of the great harms done by the modern, and particularly medical, ambivalence about death has been to magnify its damage and significance in our lives, creating excess fear and uncertainty. Those who die peacefully seem to have understood that, and thus sought to find ways to make death less, not more, important. This may have been a skill that other generations mastered better than ours, even if, lacking much choice, they were driven to it by necessity. But ours is still the same necessity, just dressed up in fine clothes to disguise the underlying reality. Those who die peacefully seem to find ways to throw off those garments, and see death for what it is, our fate.

Was there no luck in all of this? Of course. They could have had a condition that choked them to death. Or brought them to unconsciousness long before they died. Or financially ruined their families. People die that way, even though, we may rightly remind ourselves, the odds are against it. Yet, because they had been the kind of people who accepted the good and bad in life, I suspect they might well have endured more terrible deaths with the same grace. I suppose they were lucky in having a circle of family and friends who remained with them all the way, who visited and talked and watched. But was that really chance? They had always been the kind of people who drew others to them, in bad times as well as good.

As I tried to think about these deaths, however, something else occurred to me. I cannot say for certain that they were not suffering; possibly, beneath the surface, were fear, dread, anxiety, and perhaps even more pain than we thought. Yet I came to see why I would never know the truth about this. They were the kind of people who had always known when to hold their tongue, to conceal their pain, understanding full well that such a discipline is part of a tolerable life with others, both the living and the dying parts of it. If their deaths were, from the inside, far more terrible than I could know, they hid this well and thereby made it easier for those of us who survived to face our own deaths better.

I recount these observations to make two points. The first is simply to articulate a perception I find both reassuring and terrifying: we must find our own meaning for death and die our own deaths. I find it reassuring to know that the kind of person I am can and will make a difference in the way I die, in my capacity to adapt and endure. I can see, by the living and dying of others, the truth of that perception. I need not be a mere victim, whatever my dying may have in store for me. I also find it terrifying to know that I should even now, with death not immediately in sight, be working to become that kind of person, and the sooner the better. I am fearful that I may fail, or may have the kind of bad luck that would overwhelm even someone otherwise ready for, and able to accept, death. I know the kind of person I would like to become, but I have no assurance I will succeed. That is the task before me, with the outcome in doubt until I am put to the test.

We cannot, or are unlikely to, find a meaning in death entirely on our own, even if this seems the demand placed upon us. We can scarcely hope to find on our own the answer to a question that has troubled and puzzled the human species for thousands of years. We need the help of others, of a community whose meaning we can share, making it our own with the same strength as if we had discovered it for ourselves. My second point, therefore, seems to contradict my first. We must find our own meaning in death, and yet we cannot easily, if at all, do it alone. Is there a way out of this dilemma? I am not certain, and it will have to be left as an open question, the answer to which will make a great difference in the years to come. I will try to offer some suggestions of a possible direction in which to look.

Looking for meaning

Why do I say we cannot find our own meaning? By "meaning," first of all, I comprehend especially the notion of coherence and explanation. Actions or events will have meaning for us if they make a kind of sense: they are coherent with other things in life that we already understand, and we can see how they came about, even if not fully. Not everything that has meaning need be acceptable. I might come to understand the biological inevitability of death without thereby accepting the natural order that made it inevitable. My death, that is, can make sense even if I find that sense intolerable. At least I can understand what is happening. It is even better, to be sure, if I can find some justification for the way things are, but that may not be possible.

By "meaning" I also want to convey, however, the way we as human beings create communities of meaning. Words have meanings for us because we have come, as people living and talking together, to share through language and symbols our understanding of things, the external objects and events in the world and the internal feelings, thoughts, and yearnings within ourselves. The great events of life and death come to have a meaning, I believe, in a similar way. We make of them symbols of good or evil, order or chaos, threat or reassurance, and, equally, we make them patterns of order and explanation. We learn to talk and think about them. We have come to understand birth, for instance, not simply as a particular biological phenomenon, the way we all come into the world, but also as a social event. It is the way we renew the species, create our families, and bring into the world new possibilities.

We can smile with pleasure at the sound of a newborn child because that sound betokens renewal, hope, rejuvenation, continuance into the future. We come to feel part of a community because we find its system of symbols, of interpretation, and of meaning plausible and satisfying; and we know how to share with others the language of that community. We can, therefore, talk with others about the joy that the newborn child brings and understand the place that the new life, and the meaning it carries, fits into our understanding of the order of things. So too, when we encounter on occasion someone for whom a new child is a burden, a threat to some other sense of order, we can understand how a birth can have a very dif-

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ferent, threatening, meaning.

Yet it is precisely when we try to discover the meaning death has in our society that we run into trouble. It is not there to be found, at least not in our common life together, by which I mean to encompass our relationships with strangers as well as intimates. There is, in that fuller sense, no common response to death, no shared ritual, no clear conventions of succor, sorrow, and grief. They may be found, but not necessarily, within particular religious and ethnic groups, at least for those members who have remained close to their traditions and rituals. But increasingly, I suspect, the emptiness about death that marks our common life infects even those groups, if only because they cannot easily remain isolated. Here we come to what may be our most important deficit: we do not have the shared sense of destiny that Philippe Ariés identified as central to the possibility of a tame death in an earlier time. We have tried, to be sure, to find substitutes, but in each case they turn out to be ways of better mastering and controlling death, not of finding a common way to seek and share its meaning and accept its inevitability.

It is worth recollecting what those substitutes have been. The first, and still the most fateful, was to make of death a medical problem, a matter of understanding the diseases and pathologies that kill human bodies and then taking arms against them. The religious or philosophical meaning of death was pushed aside as a question. In its place was put the scientific effort to understand the causes of death. Science could thus pick up most triumphantly on an ancient theme, that of death as an accident, the result of trivial incidents or choices, each of which could have been otherwise. Medical science could in its own way agree with the plaintive lament of Simone de Beauvoir in *A Very Easy Death* (Weidenfeld): "There is no such thing as a natural death: nothing that ever happens to a man is ever natural, since his presence calls the world into question. All men must die: but for every man his death is an accident, and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation." To this sense of violation, science had a response: get rid of the causes of death, *écrasez l'infâme*.

Yet death continued to exist despite the scientific wars against it, its timing and circumstances changed but not its final and still-dominating reality. Now what was to be done? The answer was soon forthcoming and is still in the process of refinement. Why not just put death out of sight, take the sick bodies out of houses and put them in hospitals, and take the dead bodies out of living rooms and put them in funeral parlors. As the historian James J. Farrell nicely reminds us in *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Temple University Press):

> The middle-class funeral reformers promoted death control as a fight against the fear of death. In the fight, they attempted to assassinate both fear and death....By redefining death, they spared many people from an incapacitating fear of death, and from the public expression of their private emotions. By assigning the care of the body to specialists, they liberated people from death's bodily gruesomeness. By securing the ritual of the funeral in a web of social conventions under the supervision of a funeral director, they allowed bereaved people to pay their final respects with a minimum of pain and involvement. By curtailing the lengthy formality of mourning customs, they prevented death from overshadowing the lives of relatives and friends of the deceased. Motivated by an obsession for order and by a humane compassion for suffering people, funeral directors met with some success in controlling the effects of death.

But not enough success. For all their skills—now extended to that even more distancing ceremony, the memorial service—the funeral directors have no control over the dying that brings people to them. If medicine has failed to control death, and funeral ceremonies cannot altogether manage the way people feel and think about death—cannot, that is, take away the anxiety its prospect inspires—there was still one other maneuver to be tried. That move, of course, is our present emphasis upon rights and choices: empower people to sign documents specifying how they want to die, to appoint surrogates to speak in their behalf, and in that way death will be pacified.

Such a tactic is not going to work either, though surely it will have some benefits. But, then, medical science and the funeral industry have provided us some benefits also. Just not enough, never enough, and, even worse, giving us more than a hint that we may be even worse off in dealing with death than

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Virginia West Davidson, Elder, Downtown United Presbyterian Church, Rochester, New York
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we were in supposedly more primitive, backward, and innocent times. We looked to science, that great modern faith, for relief, and then to the art of psychological management as skillfully deployed by grief therapists and funeral directors, and then, as a last hope, to law and regulation. For all that, we still lack the foundation for a peaceful death—a foundation that can only be of one kind, a shared communal meaning of death, one that has some depth and richness. Without that, the other measures will continue to fail, and the nakedness of their evasions will stand out even more.

Death and solidarity

By such a shared meaning I have in mind not necessarily a precisely agreed-upon common interpretation of death. Instead, I mean some agreement on what it is we need to think together about, and how we ought to express together the communal solidarity that is broken by death, best expressed by public symbols and open grieving. The test is not the death of my known neighbor or family member but of the stranger. We need to see that these deaths matter to us as well.

To say we need a "shared communal meaning" is to deny the sufficiency of membership in a religious or ethnic group that itself offers an interpetation of death and a way of understanding it. That is surely helpful, and there is no doubt that many people die, and well, with the embrace of a particular community, usually religious. But it is increasingly hard in modern society to live only in such communities, probably impossible. We need something more general, for all of us together, not only so that the smaller religious communities will not be entirely bereft of some larger societal support, but also so that those without the benefit of such communities will not be left empty-handed at the time of their dying. Because of an increasingly extended old age, there is a good chance that many of us will die in the company of strangers, our spouses and friends dead before us, and perhaps even our children. We would do well to hope those strangers will have a sensitivity to death, that they will know how to talk with and to comfort us, and that they will see in our dying their own eventual fate and thus our common lot.

Where can that shared meaning be found? I stumble at this point. I do not know with any certainty. I only know that it is one of the great and necessary cultural tasks before us, just as important as the more generally accepted need to find some shared way of understanding the human relationship to nature, to deal with our environmental problems. I can only offer some suggestive pointers, working outward from some insights already part of our common patrimony.

We might well begin by speculating that a sense of common meaning may be more of a mosaic of elements than some single, decisive insight. I have suggested that it must encompass at least a view of the self and a picture of nature. We surely need before death to reconsider the self and the way it situates itself. A self obsessed with control—either to remedy the failures of medicine to give us a biological domination of death, or to express a commitment to the value of self-determination—will be a deficient and defective self, less flexible and protean in the face of mortality than it ought to be. A self that is, by contrast, willing to bend and shape itself to the contours of mortality—sometimes harsh and demanding, if we are unfortunate; sometimes kindly and forgiving, if we are lucky—will be better able to meet the demands of death.

We need no less to reconsider the place of nature, and particularly the human relationship to nature, to find the line between human actions leading to death, and the independent actions of nature. Nature has not been banished, and it is one of the more egregious of contemporary conceits to think it has been. A consideration of nature leads directly to medicine, which attempts to understand and control nature in the name of health and the preservation of life.

At its best, however, medicine can only work within the boundaries of nature, moving the furniture and fittings of our mortality about with some great skill, but never changing the inexorability of that mortality. A medicine that embodied an acceptance of death within it would represent a great change in the common conception of medicine, and might then set the stage for seeing the care of the dying not as an afterthought when all else has failed but as itself one of the ends of medicine. The goal of a peaceful death should be as much a part of the purpose of medicine as that of the promotion of good health. That means medicine must abandon the modern cultic myth that, in the cure of disease lies the cure of death. All good health eventually comes to an end, and nowhere is our human fragility more manifest than when we are fit and healthy. It cannot, and will not, last. Disease and death will have their day.

If those parts of the mosaic of the meaning of death could be put in place, a start would have been made. But that would still not be enough. "Why do I have to die?" William Paley, the founder of CBS and a man used to power and control and glamour, supposedly asked on his deathbed. No answer was forthcoming, of course. It is an awkward question to put before the public, yet also an arresting one, which is no doubt why the media underscored it in the story of Mr. Paley's death. It is the question to which we all want an answer, and the question we find most difficult to talk with one another about. Yet all we have left now is the need to find a way to talk together as people about death. We need to see whether a civic conversation can be developed that would blend the insights of the great religions of the world—for they have animated particular communities over the centuries, providing a road map for them—and our secular understanding of philosophy and human biology. What should we talk about? There are two directions our conversation can take—not necessarily the only directions, but I believe the most fruitful.

One of them expresses the great profundity and contradiction at the heart of human life: that death itself is necessary for life, and, that life cannot be understood without seeing the place, and the necessary place, of death. In *The Meanings*

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of Death (Cambridge University Press), the theologian John Bowker captures well this direction when, concluding his exploration of the meanings of death in the great world religions, he writes: "The religious affirmation of value includes the reality of death, maybe as the last enemy, but also as the necessary condition of life. Attempts to evade death, or to pretend that it is not serious, or to deny its necessary place in the ordering of life, have almost always been regarded by the major religious traditions as false or dangerous or subversive of truth."

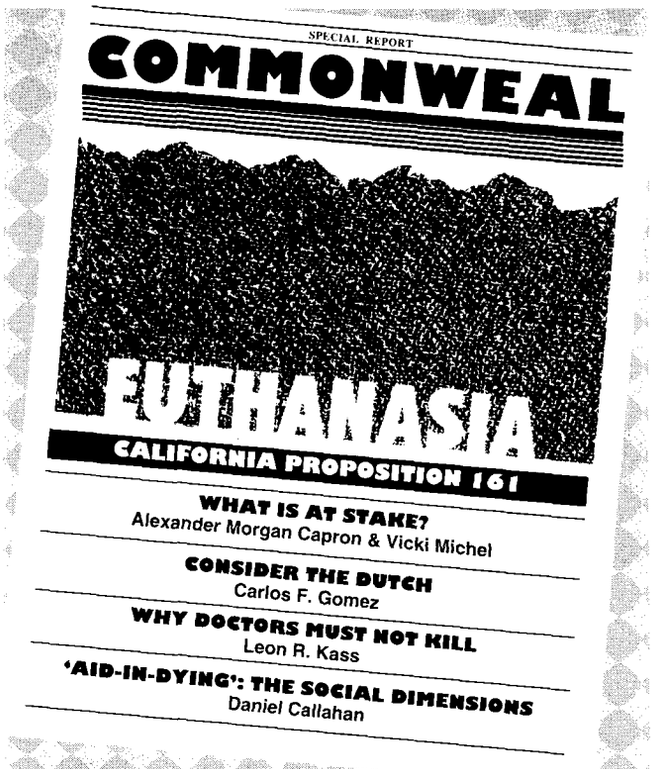
In the idea of sacrifice, Bowker sees religion and science coming together. Science makes clear to us that death is a necessary condition of life. Can we, he asks, have human life on any other terms than death? Can my children's children live unless I die? For science, he argues persuasively, the answer is as "equally emphatic" as it is in religion—no. The continuation of biological life in general requires in particular the death of each and every creature that appears. We are as individuals the living sacrifices that human existence as such requires, our own as well as every other form of life. Here, then, we can see why, in a certain view of religion and science, death is and must always remain both friend and enemy, as much the one as the other.

This is a hard truth to accept. It offers us no easy way out. But it does offer us reason to bear with one another, and bear one another, in working through the ways and cycles of nature. It requires of us a view of the human condition broader than that of our own fate and gives us a common stake in the ongoing enterprises of human life—even if, inescapably, that enterprise must grind us down as individuals.

Some will feel that is not enough, though for now it seems enough for me. I wish there could be more, a better direction. For some there will be: out of the struggle, the sacrifice, the suffering, there will be individual redemption and the possibility of transcendence. I can envy those who have such hope, even if I cannot share it. This is the bent of the great Western religions, and it is only the superstitions of modernism that would, with the back of the hand, dismiss that possibility.

We hate death, I believe, because it means the end of that life which has given us what we have, and what we can become. We no less hate death because it is the final, the crowning, reminder once and for all that we are finite, bounded creatures. We see death at the end of the road in our lives, but it is forever foreshadowed in living our daily lives. We cannot have everything we want in life. We cannot have our dreams live on forever, even if we can achieve them for a time. We cannot stop things from going wrong, however much we dedicate ourselves to control. Could we bear death better if life were perfect? Probably not. The pain of separation from life would be all the greater. It is our human condition that is the problem, of which death is the great token. But only the token.

Can death, and the life in which it is embedded, be transcended? I do not see this for myself, but I hope to live the remainder of my days in a way that at least puts me in a position to be (as Wordsworth put it) "surprised by joy." It is unlikely but perhaps not impossible. I wait and watch. □



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MY FATHER'S LEFT HAND

A DEATH HE DID NOT DESERVE

GERALDINE GORMAN

My father died early this year, hours after his transfer from the drone of an intensive care unit to the stillness of a hospice unit. The initial diagnosis that propelled him into the foreign world of high-tech medicine was oat cell carcinoma; what killed him is impossible to isolate. "Multi-system failure" is the convenient term to describe the body's surrender to disease or its attendant treatment. By the time he died, the bronchial tumor that began his month-long medical odyssey was irrelevant. The treatments had so ravaged his body, at the end the malignancy was the most benign of insults.

In the years preceding his last, he would declare with animation—cigarette in the right hand, left hand sweeping the air—that he renounced the "maintenance" of artificial support. When his time came, he would go. Death was never his fear; it was loss of dignity and control he could not accept. He had been a scrappy kid who came of age during the Depression and he knew no dependency. And we, his children, would counter with cultivated irreverence: we would maintain him at all costs, prop him in his favorite chair, a permanent spectator of the televised sports he so enjoyed. He would laugh and gesture in affectionate dismissal.

It was a joke, the blackest sort. We are enlightened adults, my father's children. His labor produced three liberal arts graduates. Together we comprise an English major turned clinical psychologist, a history major now a journalist, and a second English major who became an oncology nurse. As Jesuit university students we debated moral ethics in obligatory philosophy courses. We firmly rejected life-at-all-costs arguments and agreed, with our father, that it is the substance of days, not their quantity, that gives life its meaning.

And then three days after voluntarily entering a hospital for the first time, two days after the diagnosis that explained the dramatic weight loss, he was at the brink of respiratory failure. The bronchoscopy that had determined the definitive diagnosis produced an inflammatory reaction that, together with the rapidly growing mass, threatened to strangle the airway. With our father gasping for breath we faced the choice of agreeing to a ventilator or conferring upon him a "do not resuscitate" status and watching him die, eyes wide and chest heaving.

This was a man who had driven himself to his routine checkup two days earlier. Three years before he had climbed to the top of Yeats's tower in County Sligo and surveyed the landscape of his ancestral Ireland. An abrupt death sentence in the face of such recent vitality was obscene. He was placed on a ventilator which the pulmonary specialist described to him as a "breathing machine."

For the next three weeks the machine did its job, breathing for him, "supporting" him through emergency, high-dose chemotherapy, through three nightmarish trips to radiation treatments. It continued to breathe for him after numerous unsuccessful attempts at weaning, during which his heart raced with the sheer effort of attempting to do what, until recently, had come quite naturally.

All the while we drew specialists to us as if by magnetic force. There were principal specialists—pulmonary and oncology—and auxiliary specialists—infectious disease and nutrition. There were specialists who spoke to us and those whose existence we knew only by virtue of illegible scrawls in the chart. Some acknowledged our emotional strain; one gently touched my shoulder. Another instructed without solicitation: "A little piece of advice? Don't read the chart. Try to just be a daughter, not a nurse." My father's hand rose and fell, attempting to express something of the man becoming obscured beneath the aggressive assault on malfunctioning systems.

Over a month's time, at the bedside, this is how it unfolded: the chemotherapy and radiation, given concurrently, probably worked; his breathing improved. Unfortunately, the treatments decimated his immune system, leaving him vulnerable to any opportunistic infection loitering in the ICU. To compensate for the loss of his natural protection he received a variety of antibiotics that may have killed some bugs but also irreparably compromised his renal function. He could not tolerate tube feeding. Steroids sent his blood sugar skyrocketing and insulin was added to his hyperalimentation. His limbs swelled, his hair thinned, his mouth dried. As a nurse privy to his records, I watched the lab reports chart his inexorable decline.

And our father, the inquisitive and gentle self-made man who continued to work crossword puzzles even as his breaths became gasps, where was he? After the intubation, a sedative drip separated us. His consciousness dimmed, his eyes glazed. When titrated off the drip he resurfaced. He nodded, he mouthed

GERALDINE GORMAN *works in community health as a visiting nurse in Evanston, Illinois. She is married, has three children, and is the daughter of William Dudley Patrick Gorman, Jr.*

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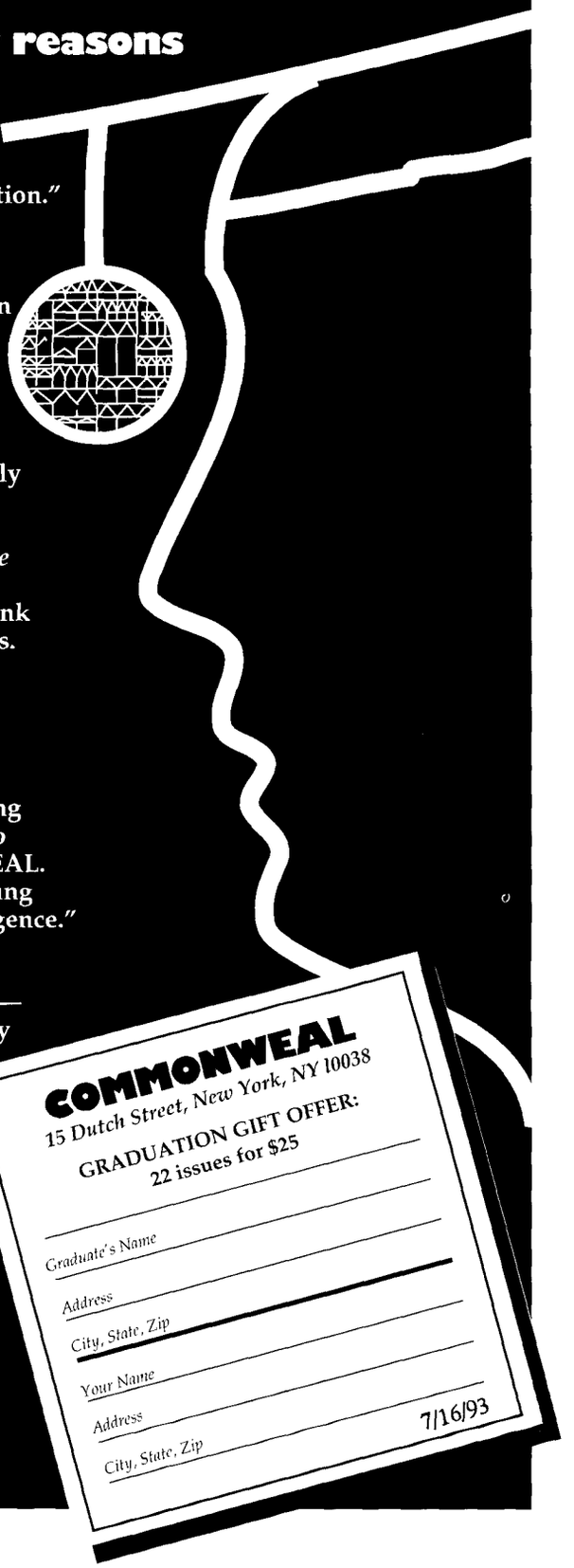

GO THOU AND DO LIKEWISE.
PLEASE.

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words, he raised his restrained arms in abortive gesture. On the eve of my birthday, he squeezed my hand and smiled, delivering as sweet a gift as this daughter shall receive. On his last "good" day he attempted to write but we could not decipher the message. We left him that night in hopes of better luck the next day, but during the early morning hours he developed intractable hiccoughs and when thorazine did not work, he was restarted on a sedative drip. He never again fully broke surface.

He slowly faded, exiting by increments, Cheshirelike in a medical wonderland. We were repeatedly cautioned not to relinquish hope prematurely. Each specialist had a case to make: his tumor type displayed "exquisite" sensitivity to treatment; his blood gases remained "good"; a broad-spectrum antibiotic might be helpful; nutrition must not be withdrawn while a machine continued to pump in breath. We waited, hoping he could somehow mend these disparate parts by force of will. We watched and he disappeared, leaving behind not a grin but the legacy of his left hand.

Why the essence of my father, the great vitality of the man, settled in his left hand, I do not know. But long after his voice was silenced by an endotracheal tube, his arms tied down to protect the airway, and his eyes had been clouded by drugs, his left hand continued to open and close, to rise and fall. It did so in testimony to that which tests cannot measure. His grip remained strong even though his body was exhausted. When it became clear that extending his life meant prolonging his dying, we gathered the specialists.

The multidisciplinary conference we requested lent medical sanction to the obvious: aggressive treatment had become useless, crossing the invisible but crucial line between support and maintenance. The ventilator was turned off; we drew the curtain around us. We removed the restraints, freeing our tethered father from the tinkerings of specialists. With so little left to do for him, we directed our solicitude toward each other, taking turns in the chair closest to his left hand which continued to gesture with an eloquence made more profound by all that had been stripped away.

At the foundation of current nursing philosophy is what is known as systems theory: We are, each, a web spun of interconnecting strands, multiple systems. The gentlest of vibrations spreads reverberations throughout. Always the whole transcends the sum of its parts.

How quickly theories crumble when they meet reality, in this case when the nurse becomes the daughter of the desperately ill patient. And still, with what tenacity I struggled to believe further medical manipulations might restore integrity to the whole.

As the final reality descended with its attendant remorse, I thought my great sorrow was born from our inability to care for my father as we had wished, to offer him what all our grandparents had known—a gentle death in one's own home. We had been contemptuous of medical technology; now we were defeated by it. At the end, however, I was less certain. That last night in ICU, alone with my father, I shared the quiet and what sleep we could manage. With my head against his chest I moved in tandem with his breathing and it was unclear who was taking care of whom. "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance/How can we know the dancer from the dance?" asked the Irish poet from his tower.

There is no final and absolute moral to this family's story. It speaks to what can become the shackles of medical technology but it is more than a reiteration of the limits of specialized, reductionist medicine. What happened to my father and his children serves as a caveat. We were catapulted from holiday celebrations into a medical morass we could not control, justify, or escape. It happened without warning and it unfolded with unimaginable rapidity.

As a nurse, I hope the health-care reforms to be fashioned protect the dignity of the individual from what can be harsh and intimidating in institutionalized medicine. With a daughter's hard-won insight, I hope for a health-care system that does not contort the whole to serve the parts, an environment in which one can be both nurse and daughter without feeling one betrays the other.

I have left the hospital for community-based nursing. The full burden of all we cannot know still weighs heavily. With it to guide my practice, I hope to help others to live and die more simply, with less fragmentation.

Death is a process that does not end with interment. To remain alive to the mystery and preciousness of the whole, this is the legacy and lesson bestowed through the power of my father's left hand. □

Richard E. McMullen

It Came to Him

From nothing he woke to a dull dream
about nurses. The nurses would wake him up;
announce, Mr. Milligram,
now we want
to do this; explain something complicated;
complete it; and let him fall backward
into nothing again.
At last, after one waking,
he realized it was not a dream.
He was awake—alive. He had lived.
Through the operation. He recalled
only nothing: no
before the operation, no
during, no afterward. No
out-of-the-bodys, no
tunnels, no
lights. He saw now the recovery room, the nurses,
his family. So, he thought, I'm alive.
Then, seconds before
the pain and discomfort took over
his body, it came to him: It is all right
if I live; it is all right, if not.

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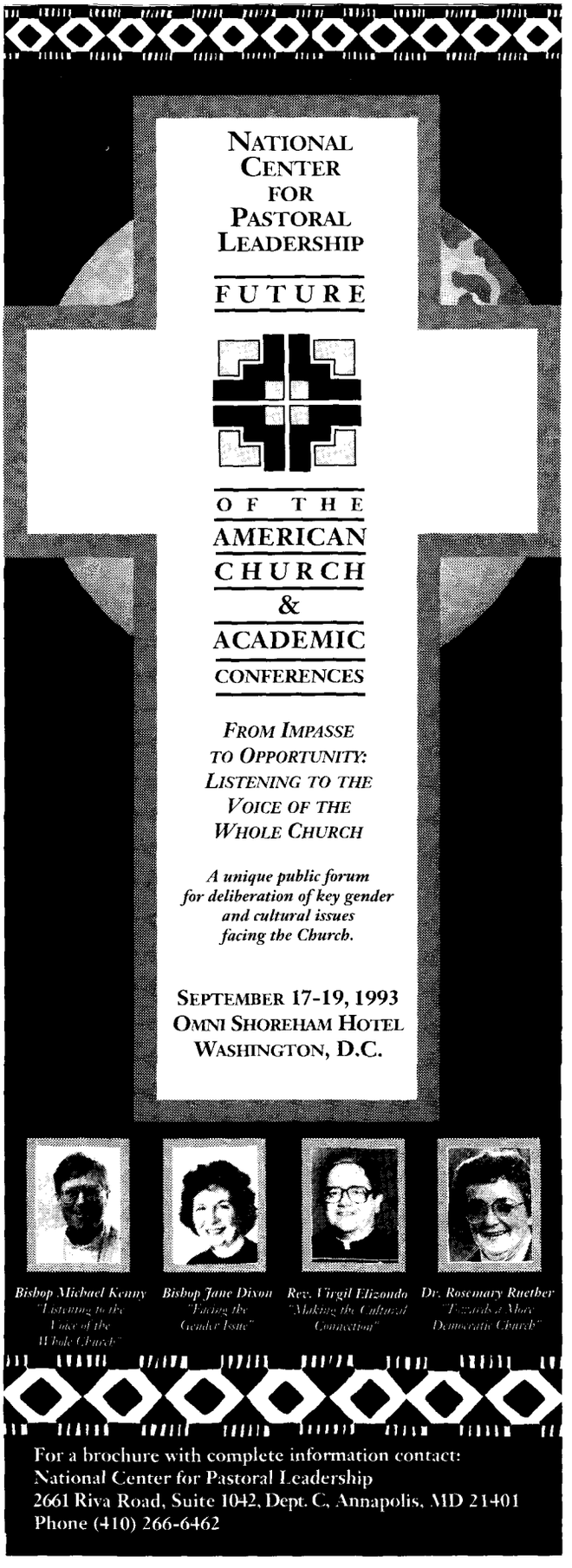
SERIOUS & GROTESQUE

KUSHNER'S 'ANGELS'

The drumroll of excitement about Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* was heard long before part 1 (*Millennium Approaches*) opened at the Walter Kerr Theatre in early May. Cheers from London, cheers from Los Angeles; publication in two issues of *American Theatre*; a gaggle of prizes including the Pulitzer. The play arrived in a cloud of expectation and gossip (changed theaters, changed directors, changed designers) and, for the most part, was received with acclaim. I am still trying to sort out my own responses to the play. I watched it—as I had read it—absorbed, fascinated, but oddly uninvolved. A friend of mine, an admirer of Kushner, said that such a reaction would suit the playwright, given his respect for Brecht. "I think that whether or not one believes one's work will change the world, one should always work as though one would hope that his or her work changes the world," Kushner told an interviewer in *Columbia* (Spring 1993). "I think political artists going back to Brecht and beyond always did their best work when they realized that art is both vital and superfluous at the same time."

Kushner is clearly political in the large sense of the word—concerned with society and its endemic chaos—but he is also a fantasist (the subtitle of *Angels* is *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*), a believer in theater as magic (he adapted Corneille's *The Illusion*). What am I to make of the stories *Angels* has to tell—the intermeshing plots—and of its hallucinatory scenes—the pill-induced fantasies of Harper, the AIDS-produced visions of Prior? And are these scenes inside or outside the characters? Or both? When an angel arrives in Shaw's *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, it is clearly a stage device, the vision of the playwright not the characters, but what of Kushner's angel, who arrives at the end of part 1 with a portentous but amorphous message to Prior, "Greetings, Prophet; /The Great Work begins:/The Messenger has arrived"? As the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg says in the scene in which Roy Cohn collapses from the AIDS that he refuses to recognize, "History is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches." Whatever Kushner intended to do to or for me, he sent me back to Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, that fascinating study of the connection between revolutionary messianism in the Middle Ages and modern totalitarian movements. Perhaps it did little to illuminate Kushner, but it is always a pleasure to read Cohn—Norman, not Roy.

The national themes in *Angels*, embedded in the the main plots, include the intoxication of power, the strength of self-delusion, the limitations of love and loyalty. The most flamboyant of the plots is the one centering on Roy Cohn, more caricature than character (but then so was the real Roy Cohn),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a vehicle that Ron Leibman makes the most of. For Cohn, life is the getting and wielding of power, which is why he denies his homosexuality, renames his AIDS to the straighter *cancer* because gays and AIDS victims are powerless. He has made a son of sorts of Joe Pitt, a slightly bent straight arrow, a conservative Mormon lawyer, whom he wants to redesign in his own image, to teach him to "transgress a little, Joseph." The transgressions Roy has in mind are political, legal, professional, but Joe has stifled transgressions of his own. He has spent his life smothering his homosexual longings and, in the process, has helped turn his wife Harper into an hysteric, a woman obsessed by a man threatening her (Joe, of course) whose only escape is dream journeys. "I'm going to hell for doing this," says Joe, the good Mormon, when he finally accepts that he is homosexual and goes off with Louis, a damnation that is certainly more positive than our last sight of Harper, settling into the comfort of an imaginary Antarctica. Louis, whose path has crossed Joe's often in the play, has guilt of his own, having deserted Prior, whom he loves, because he does not have the courage to watch AIDS destroy Prior. This description hardly indicates the texture of the play because the scenes are often very funny, sometimes sentimental, more often simply ruthless. *Angels* is a serious play which is also a grotesque comedy that brings us back to the angel who crashes through the roof at the end of the play. Norman Cohn writes:

> A boundless, millennial promise made with boundless, prophet-like conviction to a number of rootless and desperate men in the midst of a society where traditional norms and relationships are disintegrating—here, it would seem, lay the source of that peculiar subterranean fanaticism which subsisted as a perpetual menace to the structure of medieval society. It may be suggested that here, too, lies the source of the giant fanaticisms which in our day have convulsed the world.

Where does that leave the AIDS victim as prophet? Is the angel announcing the end of something or the beginning? Is the angel simply a stage device, perhaps a comic one, looking toward something better than the human losses and failures embedded in the gay fantasia, the national themes? Do we have to wait for part 2? Should I quit asking questions and simply accept that *Angels in America* is a play almost as impressive as the hoopla surrounding it? As the derelict and perhaps psychotic woman in act 3 says, "In the new century I think we will all be insane."

GERALD WEALES

E.B. de Vito

Roles Rewritten

This time, the replay recalls
their brief, outdistanced time together,
finds Lucifer recast—as is—
and not in any way at all
the angel he was before the fall.

This time, no virtual halo rests
at rakish angle on his head,
and he, not in some shining spot
is tucked in his allotted slot.

Santayana said those who do not
remember the past
are condemned to relive it.

He did not add, as he might have done,
that those who do,
rewrite it, till it is a view
of a brighter, more enhancing hue.

This time, a script completely new
denies what she seemed committed to:
the role of puppet, pawn or toy—

And now it is natural, not bizarre
to find herself in retrospect,
not just a walk-on—but the star.

SCREEN

MISTAKEN IDENTITIES

'DAVE' & 'EL MARIACHI'

The prisoner of Zenda is at large again, courtesy of two recent, well received movies: *Dave* and *El Mariachi.* In both films, as in Anthony Hope's romance, an innocent is forced to substitute for a figure of power and/or notoriety and, through pluck and common sense, the sub outdoes the subbed.

Dave, in particular, evokes the glamour of Ruritania even though it takes place in contemporary America. For when Dave, a Joe Average impersonating a stroke-disabled president at the behest of a power-mad chief of staff, first tours the White House, we are meant to catch our breaths just as he does at the sight of so much plush carpeted, crystal chandeliered splendor, to ooh and ah at the idea of a commoner having free access to the trappings of royalty. Of course I have caught on to the idea that we are a democracy and that all presidents (even when they're not Harry Truman) are common men, but, in so far as *Dave* works at all, it does so as Zenda-esque romance: a commoner walks among aristocrats and proves himself a natural aristocrat.

Dave might very well be mistaken as satire, for it does sport with some satirical notions in its first half. For instance, the hero is so ignorant of even the rudiments of government that he has to be taught about the three branches, yet when his handlers place him at the presidential podium to coach him for his

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next address, Dave immediately knows where the teleprompter should be. He may be preternaturally ignorant of our country's political operations, but Dave is instinctually media-savvy. And, in an age of photo opportunities and soundbites, mustn't such savvy pass as true wisdom? Thus, *Dave* flirts with the possibilities of satire.

But flirts seldom keep their promises. The movie loses its teeth once Dave starts taking his office seriously and decides to put the country's economy and moral priorities in order. This is quite quickly accomplished once our hero calls upon an old friend who is good with figures to deal with the budget. After one all-night session, shelters and daycare centers are saved. And, after Dave gives a press conference in which he delivers the same we-must-all-sacrifice message that lost Jimmy Carter his post (only in language far slurpier than Carter's), the press corps leaps to its feet in enthusiasm, led by...Helen Thomas!!! So *Dave* goes. Downhill.

Taken strictly as Ruritanian romance rather than satire, *Dave* would pass as a decent movie except for one unfortunate fact: it lumbers. A good literary or cinematic romance (*Zenda*, *The Third Man*, *Lola Montez*) dazzles us with atmosphere, verbal or visual lyricism, adroitness of storytelling, jokes, sex. *Dave* has a good joke or two, and Kevin Kline is skillful and charming in the lead. (He has evidently studied Harold Lloyd to good effect.) But the budding romance with First Lady Sigourney Weaver lacks tingle. The machinations of the villainous chief of staff (enjoyably hammed by Frank Langella of the magisterially sepulchral voice) are sketched instead of being menacingly unfolded, and Dave's counterattack is utterly predictable. The glimpses of the real president on life-support are too realistically grim for the light-hearted tone of the rest of the movie. The character of the president's mistress isn't utilized after the president's stroke but is left hovering in the background, thus calling attention to the fact that the scriptwriter doesn't know what to do with her. The conversion of the president's press secretary from covillain to good guy needed to be revealed by degrees; instead the transformation is done with a jerk. The unremitting music on the soundtrack keeps inviting us to glide through flower-bedecked fields with flower-power smiles on our faces. Worst of all, director Ivan Reitman stages his material reverentially, as if every plot development and line of dialogue were to be savored by the audience. Reitman's task was to get his viewers to self-lobotomize. Instead, he gives them time to think. But this particular movie, if it's to be enjoyed at all, mustn't be pondered.

Neither should *El Mariachi*, but who has time to think while watching it? Its actors are flesh-and-blood, yet this is really a cartoon, or, better still, a comic book, one of those ultraviolent, quasi-surrealistic jobs that are called graphic novels and appeal more to adults than kids. In any event, *El Mariachi* triumphs in its own grungy way. As long as there are a fair number of males (but not necessarily young males) in the audience, group self-lobotomization is assured. *Dave* may be a flirt of a movie but *El Mariachi* is an honest whore.

The success of the film derives in part from the way its creator, twenty-four-year old Robert Rodriguez, was forced to make it. The shooting schedule was fourteen days and the production cost $14,000. (That sum might keep half the wardrobe crew of *Dave* in hot lunches for a couple of days.) Aside from probably hiring only saints, suckers, and concerned relatives as collaborators, Rodriguez pulled off this stunt apparently by shooting very expeditiously with one camera and allowing himself as few retakes as possible: no pans, no eyepopping special effects, no lengthy scenes of dialogue, no fussy lighting, no shots held for more than eight seconds (thus cutting down on retakes). I would guess that whoever was available for any given shot was simply shoved in front of the camera and warned not to goof it up. Then Rodriguez patched everything together in the cutting room. He served as his own editor and good thing, too. Who else could put this jigsaw puzzle together?

El Mariachi's plot is trim, taut, action-packed, and submoronic. There's this guitar-player, see, and because he's carrying his instrument in its case, everyone mistakes him for this gangster who's carrrying an arsenal in an identical case, so when our hero...oh, the hell with it. Any attempt at summary could only ruin your fun and lower my I.Q.

Suffice it to say that nobody in this film can so much as dive into a pool or flop down on a bed without Rodriguez showing the simplest action from a zillion different camera angles. The net result isn't arty, though, just jangling and kind of fun. Cubism for kids. And when something violent is going on, Rodriguez has a knack of putting human lives on a par with the nearest inanimate object. When the heroine forces the *mariachi* to prove his identity by singing a ballad while she has a knife at his groin (he's sitting in a bath), the flurry of struggling limbs and the horrified expression on his face are intercut with the progress of a fallen shampoo bottle rolling along the floor. Because of the editing, we watch the career of the plastic container with the same degree of interest we feel for the imperiled crooner. No, I'm afraid *El Mariachi* is not a masterpiece in the great humanistic tradition of Western civilization, but Noel Coward wasn't being too perverse when he noted how potent cheap music can be.

The movie does have some old-fashioned human warmth, however. The leads—Carlos Callardo (also executive producer, wouldn't you know) as the gallant troubadour-turned-gunman, and Consuelo Gomez as the gutsy heroine—both have the sort of open, intelligent faces that give Rodriguez the excuse he needs to put a lot of very cheap, overlit close-ups on screen.

Because of his film's surprisingly good reception, Rodriguez has had offers from moneymen to make more expensive thrillers. In fact, he's been approached to remake *El Mariachi* itself with a bigger budget and more leisurely shooting schedule. Don't do it, *amigo*! You'll end up making something as well upholstered as *Dave*. Work cheap, stay rough, stay funny. If you have trouble getting your next independent project started, I'll break open my two-year-old's piggy bank. The way you work, that should pay for at least three days of production.

RICHARD ALLEVA

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'Comfort care options'

DEATH AND DIGNITY
Making Choices and Taking Charge
Timothy E. Quill
W. W. Norton, $21.95, 255 pp.

Patrick Jordan

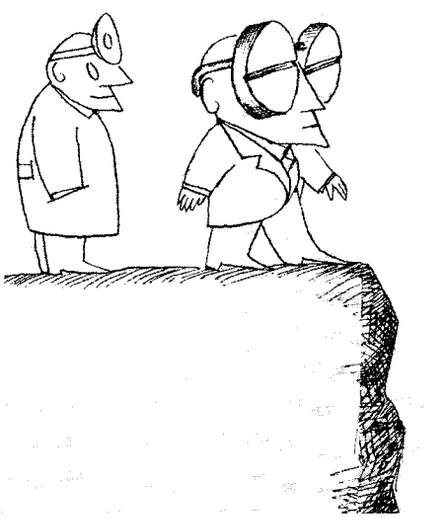
Timothy Quill is the sort of competent, compassionate physician one would hope to find for oneself. Besides having a private practice in upstate New York, Quill teaches at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry and occasionally contributes to the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*. As the former director of a hospice program, he seems to combine a commendable measure of medical expertise with a compassionate bedside manner. Why then is he someone to be uneasy about? His book gives the answers.

Death and Dignity begins with a reprint of Quill's 1991 *NEJM* article, "Death and Dignity: A Case of Individualized Decision Making." In that piece, Quill told the story of "Diane," a middle-aged, longtime patient of his who suddenly developed acute myelomonocytic leukemia, a rampant, painful, and terminal condition. At her request, Quill provided Diane with the know-how and the means to take her own life, should she decide she could no longer continue to live as she desired. Eventually, Diane did take her life, overdosing on barbiturates.

Quill's *NEJM* piece was an attempt to explain his actions and to legitimate them before the medical profession. Although he was not physically present at Diane's suicide, à la Michigan's Dr. Jack Kevorkian—from whom Quill is at pains to distinguish and distance himself in the book—the publication of Quill's article led to his eventual investigation by the New York State Health Department and by a grand jury. (In reporting Diane's cause of death, Quill had not indicated it was from an overdose.) Neither of these investigations led to actual charges being filed, however, and Quill remains in good standing. (Unlike Kevorkian, Quill seems to be highly regarded by his peers.) With the publication of his book, he is likely to become a sought-after guest on the talk-show circuit as well.

The case of Diane was formative for Quill and serves as the *leitmotif* of *Death and Dignity*. While Quill states that tough cases do not make good law, the thrust of the book is clearly the opposite. Quill's aim is to translate his experience with Diane into a model for legalizing physician-assisted suicide. He begins by claiming that cases such as Diane's are not the exception but the rule.

In the course of the book, Quill consistently argues from the particular—and the painful—to the general, with an eye on formulating public policy. He not only wishes to relieve the individual dying patient from a prolonged and agonizing death, but to free society from what are now its most conflicted and anguishing questions about the end of life. Unlike Kevorkian, however, Quill projects no Strangelovean image. He seems eminently reasonable and reassuring—up to a point. He writes, for example, that "physician-assisted suicide should never be contemplated as a substitute for comprehensive comfort care" (his term for pain management for dying patients). But a few pages later he shifts smoothly to different terrain, arguing that physician-assisted suicide should be considered "part of a continuum of comfort care options...." Seldom has the slippery slope been negotiated so adeptly.



Quill never attempts a full-scaled moral or theoretical argument for the legalization of physician-assisted suicide, never questions whether human life has value other than what we ourselves decide to give it. Instead, he relies on vignettes and the recollection of hard deaths he has witnessed to ease the reader toward his desired end. For Quill, as for the medical profession in general, the role of the physician is to be a provider: to facilitate, to heal, to enable, but never simply to stand by. If at the end of life the patient has had enough of anguish, pain, or despair, the role of the physician ought to be that of an agent who, in Quill's terms, helps the patient "over the edge into death." Rather than "abandoning" (a word that appears often in the book) the patient at the final stage, Quill argues, the doctor ought to facilitate as smooth an end as possible. (I am reminded of a semicomic character in the Audrey Hepburn film, *Two for the Road*. This fastidious American tourist keeps turning up on Hepburn's European holidays, making sure that everything is sprayed with Lysol and looks as neat as Disneyland.) The appeal and the danger in Quill's book is its combination of this blessed rage for order

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and tailored endings and his application of just-the-right-dose of "compassion." *Death and Dignity* is a strictly utilitarian argument driven by sentiment.

In a society that sees little earthly reason for enduring physical (or mental) suffering, and which fears "the loss of control" over one's life as a fate worse than death, Quill's radical medicine will go down relatively easily. The book's subtitle, "Making Choices and Taking Charge," combines two powerful political lodestars. In the United States, if you can't make your own choices and can't control your own destiny, you have, in effect, lost much of the impetus for living. A doctor who is steeped in this culture and who has already run out of technological fixes, will see little reason to persuade a patient to fight on longer. Thus, Quill says, "allowing someone a peaceful, dignified death can be a very sad, loving gift." ("Allowing" death, however, is something decidedly different from actively facilitating it, which is what Quill is proposing.)

Quill's language is consistently beguiling and misleading. "When I arrived at their house," he writes, "Diane indeed seemed peaceful." In fact, she was dead—from the overdose he had provided. He states that Diane "taught me about the range of help" he could provide patients in similar circumstances. "Range of help" may be a Hallmarkean improvement on the term "physician-assisted suicide," but at least the latter is not misleading. (Quill's other euphemisms for physician-assisted suicide include "a controlled death" and a "nonviolent death.") Facilitating such timely and compassionate deaths, he says, ought to be considered "a fundamentally vital role for physicians." By turning even the word "vital" on its head, Quill has effectively delegated physicians as the final arbiters of power and control. It is a prerogative too many already feel is theirs.

As mentioned before, Quill stakes out his main premise early on: "Untreatable suffering prior to death is unfortunately not rare." But is this actually the case, and if it is, does it need to be? Quill provides no statistics, offers no surveys of hospitals, hospices, or nursing homes. Instead, he relies on anecdotes, mostly from his own practice. I asked a nursing supervisor who has worked with terminally ill cancer patients full-time over the last fifteen years what her experience had been. She told me that when it came to untreatable pain, she had run into such instances about once every five years. If that is the case, Quill's argument hardly amounts to a persuasive reason to legalize euthanasia-on-demand. What dissuades most of this nurse's patients from calling for a final, magic bullet? "Compassionate care makes them feel valued," she says. Compassionate care, for her, necessarily implies and includes skilled pain management.

A recent Catholic Health Association publication, "Care of the Dying: A Catholic Perspective" (The Catholic Health Association, Saint Louis), does provide some disheartening figures, ones Quill might have liked to quote. The study says that nearly 25 percent of cancer patients "die with severe, unrelieved pain." But the study then examines the reasons for this sad statistic—including doctors' lack of pain-management skills—and offers a wide range of practical policies and medical modalities that would dramatically lower it.

Instead of the patience and dedication such a course of treatment—already available—relies on, Drs. Quill and Kevorkian want to force the hand of death, to speed up its house calls. Death probably won't object, but care-givers ought to know and do better. When death comes before its time, some of life's best and most important moments are lost. When that happens, we and our loved ones are all diminished. □

A LONG VIEW, A SHORT MAN

THE DORK OF CORK
Chet Raymo
Warner Books, $18.95, 354 pp.

Clare Collins

Frank Bois is a dwarf, 43 inches tall and 43 years old. For as long as he can remember, Frank has looked to the night sky for company; to the splendor of comets and constellations and lunar eclipses, which he studies from his rooftop in a down-at-the-heels section of Cork, Ireland. Isolated by his deformity, Frank has led a solitary, lonely life. As an adult, he finds the prospect of romance—or for that matter, any sexual encounter—unlikely.

We meet Frank when he is on the verge of great fame, having written a much-anticipated memoir, soon to be published by Penguin. Called *Nightstalk*, his book is, he tells us, "a work on the night sky, descriptive and poetic, with a generous lacing of personal history." This history includes his peculiar upbringing by a distant, troubled mother who, as a child, witnessed an unspeakable tragedy in Nazi-occupied France. Also central to his tale is the influence of three men, his mother's lovers, who become, at various times, his surrogate fathers. "It is because of my deformity that the publisher has such confidence in the marketability of my book," Frank is compelled to add.

The fictional book within a book provides the underlying conceit for *The Dork of Cork*, an enchanting novel by Chet Raymo, a professor of physics at Stonehill College in Massachusetts, a science columnist for the *Boston Globe*, and the author of *365 Starry Nights* and *The Soul of the Night*. Set almost entirely in and around Cork, Frank begins his story at the end of World War II, when he is conceived by his stowaway French mother, the beautiful Bernadette, aboard a U.S.-bound troop carrier which stops in Cork Harbor for provisioning. Apprehended by immigration officials, Bernadette manages to escape into the streets of Cork, making the city her home.

Months later, Jack Kelly, the immigration officer who first interviewed Bernadette, sees her on the street and attends to her baby's birth: "...the midwife pulled from Bernadette's womb the unfortunate child, a squashed sort of thing

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with legs and arms disproportionately small compared to the torso, like sprouts budding from the eyes of a potato....He saw the fright in the face of the girl who was, after all, not much older than his daughter....'Tis a lad,' he said, beaming into the imploring eyes of the exhausted girl."

Soon after, Jack and Bernadette become lovers. This is a role entirely out of character for Kelly, faithful father of six, and the affair is cut short when his daughter Emma witnesses their lovemaking. Still, he continues to act as a friend to Bernadette and a father figure to Frank. He also introduces Frank to what soon becomes his passion: star gazing. And Jack's daughter Emma comes, for Frank, to embody the stars' physical beauty and unreachable distance.

I admit, I was leery of reading a book about a little person set in Ireland, especially given the off-beat title. But this is not, in particular, a book about Ireland. Rather, the country offers a fitting haunt for one such as Frank, providing a sufficient number of dour dark settings for the novel's black humor.

Despite Frank's deformities (and Frank does feel he's deformed), Raymo imbues him with such humanity that he avoids a common failing of novelists: turning characters into bizarre, nasty caricatures, with actions so unbelievable that it's hard for the reader to understand, let alone sympathize, with them. Likewise, Bernadette might be distant and self-absorbed, but Raymo has taken pains to see that we understand how her experiences in war-torn France damaged her ability to love. Even the sinister Hans Scrieber, who seduces, then discards Emma, leaving her completely unhinged, is a unique villain. It seems Scrieber can only produce his amazing scientific theories when inspired by a mistress. His liaison with Emma nets him the Nobel Prize! There are a host of other likable, slightly daffy characters, among them Roger Manning, the Protestant curate who writes erotic poetry and dreams of domesticating Bernadette, and Handy Paige, the half-soused literary agent who never fails to remind Frank that dwarfism sells.

Throughout, Raymo demonstrates a scientist's talent for order by intertwining Frank's first-person narration with that of the book within a book without confusing the reader. And, by contrasting the beauty of the heavens—here Raymo's writing can be stunning—with more earthy flaws, he continually forces the reader to examine "how beauty and hurt get jumbled up together." At one point, Raymo, who has a taste for the brutal, manages to force this issue upon the reader, through a conversation between Frank and his editor: "Tell me, Jennifer, do you think that—hypothetically—do you think that you could fall in love with me?"

"...I would like to be the kind of person that could fall in love with you, but I'm not," she responds.

"If it's any consolation, Jennifer, I don't blame you. I'm not that kind of person either. What is beautiful is always more desirable than what is not beautiful."

If I have one complaint with the *Dork of Cork*, it is that the ending is a little too neat, too precious. To reveal it would spoil everything, but I wish Raymo hadn't succumbed to the need to put everything aright in the end. Still, it is a small criticism for a book alive with so many enduring characters. □

COMMONWEAL: THE SEQUEL

BEING CATHOLIC

Commonweal from the 1970s to the 1990s

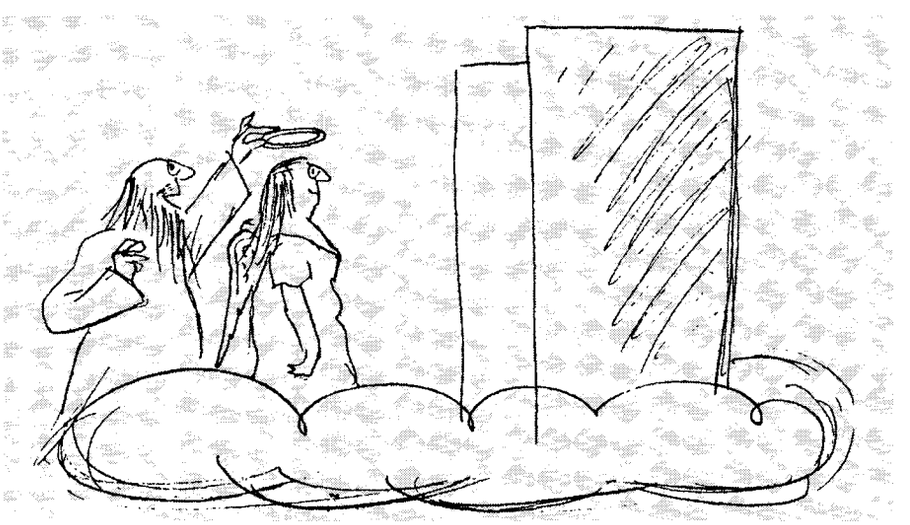
Rodger Van Allen

Loyola University Press, $12.95, 203 pp.

George G. Higgins

Fifty-odd years ago, Jacques Maritain published a brief but incisive essay on "The Problem of the Catholic Press" as an appendix to his book, *True Humanism*, which dealt with a series of questions belonging to that section of philosophy which Aristotle and Saint Thomas called "Practical." The "problem" of the Catholic press which Maritain analyzed had nothing to do with a rise in printing costs or a decline in circulation figures or any of the other bread-and-butter problems which are the bane of every publisher's existence, but it was and still is a very "practical" problem nonetheless.

Writing as a philosopher, Maritain drew a distinction between "two essentially different types of periodicals, the one specifically Catholic and religious, and as a result Catholic *by definition*; the other specifically political or 'cultural,' which we must indubitably wish to be



"Voila"

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Catholic, but Catholic *in inspiration* only, not by denomination." Both types of periodical, he said, are necessary, but to ignore or even to blur the distinction between them, he insisted, inevitably leads to confusion.

Maritain's essay was not the last word on the "problem" of the Catholic press, but it is still very timely, especially in a country like our own where the majority of Catholic publications are "specifically Catholic or religious" and only a handful fit into the second of the two categories referred to above.

Periodicals of the second type, as Maritain points out, "do not engage the church—even if, as is to be desired, they draw their inspiration in the most courageous and intrepid manner from Christian wisdom...." That is to say, "they involve no other initiative than that of the particular persons or groups who have started them." Regrettably, we do not have enough publications of this kind in the United States. But, thanks be to God, we have had *Commonweal* since 1924, and it is still alive and well. Indeed, writing as one who was introduced to *Commonweal* in his teens, I would argue that the magazine is today as good as or better than ever—and that's saying a lot.

From the very beginning, *Commonweal*'s lay editors have drawn their inspiration—in the most courageous and intrepid manner—from Christian wisdom, and, almost always, have done so with extraordinary civility.

Rodger Van Allen's earlier study of *Commonweal*, *The Commonweal and American Catholics*, published by Fortress in 1974, coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the magazine. The present follow-up volume, which anticipates *Commonweal*'s forthcoming seventieth anniversary, brings his study up to the present. Like his earlier volume, it is so structured—by topics, some of them neuralgic—as to be, in effect, not only a synoptic history of the magazine during the past two decades but also of American Catholicism during this turbulent post-Vatican II period. Parenthetically I might note that September will see the publication of another book also dealing in part with the history of *Commonweal*—an in-depth scholarly biography of the late George Shuster, one of the magazine's early associate editors (*George Shuster: On the Side of Truth*, by Thomas E. Blantz, University of Notre Dame Press).

For the convenience of the reader Van Allen has listed chronologically the members of *Commonweal*'s staff from 1973 through 1993. They are a distinguished company. We owe a debt of gratitude to all of them and to their predecessors, but to no one more so than the indomitable Edward Skillin, who joined the staff in 1934 and, now in his eighties, is still commuting to the office every day and was until recently jogging to early Mass. Van Allen's concluding tribute to Skillin as a sterling Christian gentleman and as the keeper of *Commonweal*'s corporate conscience and the guardian of its institutional memory is richly deserved. Had it not been for him, *Commonweal* might have folded long ago—and what a terrible loss that would have been to American Catholicism. ❑

ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL—AGAIN

RELIGION AND RADICAL POLITICS
An Alternative Christian Tradition in the United States
Roger H. Craig
Temple University Press, $34.95, 320 pp.

NO LONGER EXILES
The Religious New Right in American Politics
Michael Cromartie, ed.
Ethics and Public Policy Center, $18.95, 145 pp.

CHURCH, STATE, MORALITY, AND LAW
Patrick Hannon
Christian Classics, $19.95, 159 pp.

Clarke E. Cochran

What a difference a decade makes. In 1979, when I first taught a course on religion and politics, pertinent academic and general literature was rare. What little existed was often decades old and confined largely to law, church history, religious studies, social ethics, and sociology of religion. It was of marginal political sophistication and offered little guidance concerning the emerging Religious Right, the primary attention-getter in those days.

Years of feverish research and commentary followed, especially from 1979-84. Academics and pundits made "religion and politics" synonymous with "New Religious Right" or "New Christian Right," which more often than not was simply identified with the "Moral Majority" of the Reverend Jerry Fallwell. That preoccupation created its own set of perceptual distortions, so that even in 1984 few thought of the Reverend Jesse Jackson in the context of religion and politics.

By 1993, the American Political Science Association had formed a Religion and Politics Section, and keeping up with the literature now requires full attention and a substantial budget for books and journals. More importantly, the complete range of interaction has come into view, and breathless concern with the Religious Right has given way to sober and balanced analysis. The three works under review exemplify this development. Not only are Left, Center, and Right represented, but the discussions are deeply rooted in historical research, contemporary public debate, and academic discourse. This means, of course, that they are comprehensive, informative, and dull.

Best is the Cromartie volume, *No Longer Exiles: The Religious New Right in American Politics*. The Religious Right is now old enough for retrospection and projection. In 1990 the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a neoconservative Washington think tank sympathetic to, but not captured by, the Religious Right held a conference to assess its past and speculate

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"Doesn't my dossier mention my stand on mandatory fuel allocations?"

about its future. Papers by four of the top students of the movement—George Marsden (church history), Robert Wuthnow (sociology), Booth Fowler (political theory), and Corwin Smidt (political science)—drew responses from other scholars and Religious Right activists. The four primary contributions provide a capsule history of the movement (Marsden), solid assessments of its successes (Wuthnow and Smidt), and an iconoclastic argument that it failed (Fowler). *No Longer Exiles*, together with Matthew Moen's *The Transformation of the Christian Right*, provides an accessible, concise fix on the status of the movement.

The Left of the spectrum in this set of books is anchored by Robert H. Craig's uneven blend of historical storytelling and radical advocacy. As Craig remarks at the beginning, Christian hope is sustained by memory, and the memory of the radical Christian tradition in American culture and politics is presently dim. *Religion and Radical Politics* aims to recall seminal radical social activists inspired by and committed to the gospel. Craig begins the story with midnineteenth-century Christian labor movements and concludes it with the pacifism of A.J. Muste and Dorothy Day. Along the way, he tells the story of feminist agitators, sharecropper organizing, black preachers of social justice, and Christian socialists, including Jesse H. Jones, Frances Willard, Mother Jones, Reverdy Ransom, Howard Kester, and Claude Williams.

The strength and weakness of *Religion and Radical Politics* lie in the portraits of these individuals, their struggles of faith and conscience, clashes with other movement figures and with conventional society and church, and their organizing and protest activities. Yet Craig is a professor of religion and philosophy, not a historian. His narrative history is continually overlaid and interrupted by lessons to be drawn from the lives he recounts, lives that he reduces to vignettes in order to carry a moral lesson. Particularly telling is the longest and most appealing narrative, that of Claude Williams's efforts to organize miners and tenant farmers in Arkansas and elsewhere during the 1930s. Yet Craig interrupts this fascinating story with institutional histories. Finally, it simply peters out without a solid conclusion.

Just as the stories get interesting, Craig moves on to another historical figure who either succeeds or fails at recognizing the importance of racial inclusiveness in the movement, who illustrates the importance of acknowledging the primacy of class struggle, or who anticipates a strong Marxist analysis of the oppression of workers and the political action necessary for their liberation. Craig contends that only a "constructive social ethics based upon historical knowledge and understanding can make an important contribution to ethical analysis. It connects a liberation tradition that has sought to be faithful to the demands of the gospel as good news for the poor with the aspirations of people for a democratic socialist future." Enough of such ideological freight will slow any narrative to a crawl. *Religion and Radical Politics* fails both as partisan history and socialist theory. It remains, however, worth browsing through to discover the shape of a neglected past, whose narratives can be followed up in the biographies he draws upon.

Church, State, Morality, and Law, attempts a particularly Catholic answer to the question of civic responsibility in the midst of religious-political pluralism. "How is a Catholic expected to vote on certain types of issues involving morality and law?" Hannon, professor of philosophy at Saint Patrick's College, Maynooth, wishes to answer this question for Irish and American Catholics, as well as for Christians generally. In doing so, he traverses basic moral philosophy, the natural law tradition, Vatican II's teaching on the church in the modern world, dissent and the magisterium, the 1960s Devlin-Hart debate on the legal enforcement of morality, and the roles of the laity and the hierarchy in applying Catholic moral theology in the policy marketplace.

These are all important matters, and Hannon hits the right notes, although without originality or verve. In the "culture wars" of Ireland and the United States, the fundamental philosophical question is how religious commitment and religious language can appear in public discourse without sounding alien and uncivil on the one hand, or conventional and commonplace on the other. The material Hannon brings to this question is pertinent, but his ultimate position is so right-down-the-middle and his review of the sources so unremarkable, that there is no snap to his discussion.

The Religious Right, Left, and Center alike grasp today for a firm hold on political reality. During the 1980s the Religious Right perceived itself simultaneously as inside and outside the American mainstream. For insider status it appealed to its perceived place within the dominant religious heritage of the nation and to its supposed influence with the Reagan and Bush administrations. Yet the Religious Right also saw itself as an outsider with respect to the secular cultural elites that it viewed as dominating education, the media, and popular culture.

After the election of Bill Clinton, the Religious Right has moved closer to the fringe. At the same time, however, it now possesses the opportunity to draw strength

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from formerly complacent traditionalist Christians, who must fight political and cultural battles without White House support. As Wuthnow and others in *No Longer Exiles* argue, this means that the focus for these contests will be local and state governments, not Capitol Hill. Locally the ground is cleaner, the troops more maneuverable.

Paradoxically, the same is true for the Religious Left. The local organizing described in *Religion and Radical Politics* is more challenging and effective than grand Christian socialist ideological movements. The Christian Left has always seen itself as an outsider with regard to American capitalism and materialist, consumer culture. It is too realistic to view itself as a Democratic party insider, though it does hope to find occasional welcome at the White House back door.

If the Christian Left is to be an insider at all, it must do so within the paradox of salvation history, understanding that despite all appearances, God is on the side of the poor, weak, and outcast. The only effective way, however, to be such an insider is to share the world of the poor where they live. In other words, to act locally.

This leaves the Center, often occupied by Catholics in their voting and political-social attitudes. Having deserted the Democratic party in the 1980s, they returned to the fold in 1992. They are Center, however, less out of conviction than because they end up suspended between forces pulling to the Right (prolife, family values) and to the Left (economic justice). Catholic political thinkers and activists will discover no firm place among centrist Democrats or Republicans. Yet the Catholic Center, similar to their brothers and sisters on either side of the cultural war, just may find happiness in local action. What shape creative, centrist religious-political action may take in the local community has yet to be defined. □

WORDS FAIL ME

THE SON OF LAUGHTER
Frederick Buechner
HarperSanFrancisco, $19, 274 pp.

Irving Malin

Although Frederick Buechner has written twenty-six books, half fiction and half nonfiction, he has not received the critical attention he deserves. It is the right time now to recognize that he is one of our significant artists—one who is at least as important as Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy.

Buechner is a religious novelist, but, as he writes in *The Clown in the Belfry* (1992), he refuses to be dogmatic or propagandistic. He, indeed, compels us to define exactly what a "religious novelist" does. Buechner knows that he cannot simply offer fixed messages. He believes that faith, like fiction itself, is surprising, edgy, always elusive.

The question of belief is at the heart of Buechner's work. How can he *surprise* secular readers? How can he make us wonder about the relation of language and faith? How can he express ambiguities that disturb believers and nonbelievers? His novels are alarming because they walk a thin line; they disturb us in the same way works by Spark and Greene do. Perhaps the clue to all of Buechner's books is that he makes us wonder about how we can find spiritual truth in the comic incident; how we can move from easy interpretations to sudden revelations; how the mystery of faith is found in the faulty language we use repeatedly. His books offer coincidences, secrets, and dreams which resist fallen words.

I want to stress Buechner's methods by offering examples of his comic interpretations of interpretations, of his surprising new hermeneutics. Please excuse the following series of examples; it is merely a way to demonstrate that Buechner's artistic method relies upon the uncertainty of how we "know" meanings.

In his first novel, *A Long Day's Dying* (published at the age of twenty-four in 1960), he gives us a Jamesian style—he has not yet found his true voice—which attempts to demonstrate that human understanding is limited. The style, if you will, is elaborately constructed to *deconstruct* our confidence as interpreters: "The extend of Bone's [the spiritual guide of the novel] monkey's knowledge or, more exactly, of his ability to retain or to assimilate what he saw was a matter for much conjecture and a question often considered but seldom expressed as if from fear, that once asked, it might be answered."

Although critics condemned the novel as precious and contrived, they didn't notice the playful aspects of Buechner's method. Surely the mixture of late Jamesian style applied to the interpretation of a monkey's "understanding" is amusing. If we can't know—or don't want to know—the ability of a monkey to "think"—then how can we dare grasp human and superhuman messages?

In the "wonderful"—a pun intended—*Book of Bebb* (a series of four novels about Bebb) there are again many references to misunderstandings, to linguistic inadequacies. Bebb is mysterious; he offers earthy, crazy words which can be taken in many ways. In the following passage the ambiguities signify that his words are

REVIEWERS

PATRICK JORDAN *is managing editor of* Commonweal.

CLARE COLLINS *is a writer who lives in Pawcatuck, Connecticut.*

MSGR. GEORGE G. HIGGINS *is an adjunct lecturer at The Catholic University of America.*

CLARKE E. COCHRAN *is professor of political science at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, where he teaches and writes on religion and politics, social welfare and health policy, and political philosophy. He is also a Catholic deacon.*

IRVING MALIN *teaches at CCNY. He has written on such religious writers as O'Connor and Percy.*

JOSEPH HYNES *teaches modern literature at the University of Oregon.*

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both loony and profound. Note that the narrator's voice, from *Treasure Hunt* (1977), is different from Bebb's and from the voice in *A Long Day's Dying*. The passage, I think, startles us and makes us think about the value of words and of the Word. He surprises us with the suggestion that Bebb may hold "secrets" from "another world." "As for the tape itself, to me it was all fascinating—even the lists, the pauses, the unfinished scraps of things—because it was all Bebb, and Bebb speaking from *another world*, and Bebb speaking to himself, which meant that for all I knew he *might at any moment lay some secret bare*, some shadowy corner of those last days of his life when he recorded it" (my italics).

An odd passage from *The Clown in the Belfry*, a collection of Buechner's essays about "faith" and "fiction," is instructive. In the introduction he writes: "It is bats that are supposed to be found in belfries, but for a few incandescent moments in 1831 a man named Lyman Woodward was to be found in one that is still higher than any building in Rupert, Vermont. The event is described in its *proper place*. Suffice it to say here only that one day he climbed up and stood on his head in the belfry. Why did he do it? Was he drunk? Was he crazy? Who knows? Who even cares? The point is that it was a gorgeous, clownish, inspired, and inspiring thing to do. It was a *radically* new way of looking at the mysteries of earth and heaven. It is Saint Paul writing, 'We are fools for Christ's sake'" (my italics).

Note that the commonsensical style suggests that such words as "crazy" or "drunk" are insufficient—that they are meaningless in defining all the "mysteries of earth and heaven."

In *The Son of Laughter*, Buechner dares to retell the biblical story of Jacob. Indeed, he dares to enter the complex, bewildered consciousness of a revered ancestor. He uses simple sentences which, in effect, mirror the Hebraic style. Jacob throws away the idols of the heathens and he says "simply": "Who knows about gods? Maybe they have seen every step I have taken ever since. Maybe they are still waiting for me to call once again their queer and terrible names."

Once again, it seems to me, Buechner is questioning the nature of interpretation. We have come a long way from the circumlocutions of Henry James and the monkey, but we still recognize that words are "queer" and "terrible" because they can't hold the mysteries of even everyday events.

The Son of Laughter reinforces this understanding of the limitations, the fallen ghostly nature of words. Jacob comes to realize the inadequacy of language. "He [Isaac which means "he will laugh" in Hebrew] would pass among his people with his sad smile and liquid eyes trying to say things to them that would raise their spirits, but it didn't matter what he said to them. What raised their spirits was just the sight of him."

Jacob speaks as the novel progresses. However, his conversational style unsettles us because we don't expect Jacob to be so "down to earth." His talk is startling—more and more about dreams, visions, and signs, and his emphasis upon these reinforces the point that the "uncanny" is beyond language. This is how Buechner imagines Jacob's confronting the angel and wrestling with this being: "We were both of us whispering. He did not wait for my answer. He blessed me as I had asked him. I do not remember the words of his *blessing* or even if there were words. I remember the blessing of his arms holding me and the blessing of his arms letting me go."

The Son of Laughter is a re-creation of Jacob (or "Israel" as he is called after his love-battle with the angel) but it refuses to settle for closure. It ends, in fact, with uncertainty: "Who knows the full meaning of words?"

I'm afraid I have used many words to convey that Buechner is a master stylist—a stylist who moves easily from late James to Hebraic simplicity. He recognizes, despite his brilliant words, that language cannot capture those extraordinary, wordless, "radical" moments (or eternities) which transfigure us. Perhaps he should have the last word: "Faith and fiction both journey forward in time and space and draw their life from the journey, *are* in fact the journey. Fiction can hold opposites together simultaneously like love and hate, laughter and tears, despair and hope, and so of course does faith which by its very nature both sees and does not see and whose most characteristic utterance perhaps, is 'Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.'" □

A DECEMBER-DECEMBER ROMANCE

DEAR JAMES
Jon Hassler
Ballantine Books, $21, 438 pp.

Joseph Hynes

"Love is best for everybody," remarks Bishop Richard ("Call me 'Dick'") Baker. And Jon Hassler has set out, in his seventh novel, to put some moral zip, humor, and poignance into the bishop's soggily incontrovertible platitude. To that end, *Dear James* restores to us as principals Miss Agatha McGee of Staggerford, Minnesota, and Father James O'Hannon of Ballybegs, north of Dublin, two who figured centrally in Hassler's *A Green Journey* (1985), when they were sixty-seven. They are now seventy.

In the earlier novel Agatha and James had become soulmates through their correspondence over several years. When Agatha eventually visited Ireland, however, she learned that James had concealed his priesthood from her—because he feared diminishing the openness of their letters were he to declare his identity—and no letters have been exchanged in the intervening three years. Their agreement was that she would write first, if she thought she could do so—although it

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"Should we go see the pope tomorrow, Darrin?"

"I seen enough popes."

"You have not, you haven't seen any."

"I seen their statues."

"I guess this one talks ten languages."

"You mean he's alive?"

"Of course he's alive—what did you think?"

"I thought you couldn't be a pope until you were dead and a miracle happened."

"That's a saint, you dumb shit...."

Was there a teen-ager anywhere in Ireland, James wondered, who didn't know the difference between popes and saints? How foreign America must be. How pagan. How mysterious.

—Jon Hassler
Dear James

turns out that each has written long unmailed letters to the other, regularly, since that traumatic occasion.

Each is now in dire need of the other. Agatha's beloved Saint Isidore's School has been closed by Bishop Baker and she has grown sour and reclusive between her June retirement from teaching and Thanksgiving, when this book opens. James has undergone surgery for cancer and has also been retired as pastor.

Their need, their author, and God's grace cooperate to let them meet again, this time during Agatha's pilgrimage to Italy with American students. Rome works its spell on three coreligionists, convincingly, despite Hassler's rather heavy-handedly arranging for the pope to single out James for special encouragement. Assisi, however, has an even greater effect, both because it more closely resembles the small towns they know and because it prompts the analogue of Saints Francis and Clare in their intensely chaste love for each other. This kind of love grows between Agatha and James, most movingly, and Hassler is expert in persuading us that such love is possible and healing, spiritually and physically, even as he refuses to wax sentimental or soft-pedal the difficulties of any kind of attachment. Indirectly the book questions the requirement of priestly celibacy.

Hassler wants to cure these two, however, for reasons beyond that healing itself. He wants their religious faith and their love to act on and for others. Thus James discards his bitterness over diocesan politics and over his inability to find intellectual friendship among his parishioners, and determines to spend his remaining years in the cause of Irish peace—a difficult and dangerous mission. Like James, Agatha must discard self-pity and work again for others. Her reversion to type sees her driving James on his speaking engagements, helping to rehabilitate a young Irish boy by moving him to a family in Staggerford, and forgiving Imogene and other Staggerfordians, who have contrived to damage her reputation. Importantly, she tells French Lopat, a troubled Vietnam veteran and local drifter, who he is. He is her only living relative, a grand-nephew, and her ability to overcome two generations' small-minded refusal to tell the truth about his origins marks her own growth in concern for others.

I do not want to suggest that *Dear James* is a tract, or that the two principals are made to seem perfect. As always, Hassler is conscious of the pettiness, sometimes vicious and sometimes hilarious, of which we are all capable and which we are ever ready to spot in others. The task is to see such facts charitably if we can.

For example, the natives gathered at Thanksgiving and Easter dinners at Agatha's house range from the shiftless and virtually mute French Lopat, to the drunken and lewd old Sylvester Juba, to Juba's daughter, Sister Judith, a liberated nun given to touching and hugging. Judith thinks of creation as God our mother's "laying an egg," and has no use for the doctrine of Original Sin. It is such human behavior, anywhere, that the book's gentle indirectness urges us to see and to ignore or take in stride, trusting in God and the long view as well as in our own works. James speaks of "the tyranny of tradition," by which in large part he means his and Agatha's tendency to cling to pre-Vatican II liturgy, language, thinking. James, Agatha, and Hassler alike finally realize that attention to such tradition for its own sake can detract fatally from true growth in faith and love, and indeed from the reality of Original Sin, which is not to be forgotten and which is not to be resisted by reviving Latin or forcing nuns to wear habits.

In Hassler's novels, loneliness is prominent. It is not purged but is transformed and disciplined by ironic wit and by love, charity. Hassler's development in scope and depth in this regard is clear in his last three novels—*Grand Opening* (1987), *North of Hope* (1990), and this new book. Moving both omnisciently and epistolarily from November to July, from Staggerford to Ireland to Italy, and developing a substantial subplot concerning French Lopat and Imogene Kite, he retains his sharp-eyed ability to laugh at silliness in or outside of the church, even as he transcends the topical to give us the sacred-secular picture from long range. Hassler manifests the rare ability to write fiction both popular and important. □

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CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 2)

ity only in functional terms, then the exclusion of women from priesthood is clearly a statement that women are inferior. If I understand equality ontologically, then it may be possible to maintain that women are equal, but different.

Or if I accept the tendency of liberalism to maximize individual freedom and seek autonomy, then anything which infringes on my freedom or that imposes a duty on me not in proportion to another's duty is a violation of my "rights." But if I am a member of a community working for a common goal—such as the father of a family who gives up personal time to spend more time with his son, or a ball player who sacrifices personal glory for team success—then the language of "rights" seems misplaced; sacrifice is a part of reaching the goal.

A Marxist thinker will always resist an analysis of the "natural order of things," believing such analysis to be reactionary—an excuse not to act. Attempts to define women's or men's roles on the basis of biology and/or psychology are immediately dismissed.

Because of our different assumptions, then, we are speaking different languages that neither side understands. Perhaps the first step toward moving together is to address these assumptions, rather than ordination directly. Otherwise, the argument proceeds as if between deaf partners.

FAUSTIN N. WEBER

The writer is the principal and a teacher of theology at Montgomery Catholic High School.

Woodward on Quindlen

Silver Spring, Md.

To the Editors: Book reviews usually say more about the reviewer than about the book. Kenneth L. Woodward's deep disdain for Anna Quindlen's *Thinking Out Loud*—more, for virtually everything Ms. Quindlen believes—is obvious ["A Visit to Quindlenland," May 21]. I almost fear to respond for fear that any remark will be taken as an attack on the writer rather than a considered reflection on his work. I read Ms. Quindlen regularly with appreciation, though I am not always in agreement.

Fair play compels me to suggest, however and with all due respect, that *Commonweal* readers would be well served by some balance in such cases when the material at hand is clearly repugnant to the reviewer. A second review by a more "objective" critic, or by one who is as frankly enchanted as Mr. Woodward is repulsed, might reveal some hint of why the Pulitzer Prize committee found merit in Ms. Quindlen's writing. It is hard to imagine that committee members were collectively any more (or less, for that matter) taken by her political positions than Mr. Woodward. Presumably they saw something in the writing that his fury obscured.

MARY E. HUNT

From the Editors: Commonweal *readers will feel balanced on this subject if they have read Alexander M. Santora's "Anna Quindlen: From the '60s to the '90s" (February 14, 1992).*

The reviewer replies:

If Ms. Hunt will read my review again she will find that my criticism focuses precisely on how Ms. Quindlen's writing achieves its questionable effects. Regarding Pulitzer Prize committees, I find Ms. Hunt naive and invite her to ponder this: when David Shaw of the *Los Angeles Times* was nominated for a Pulitzer in 1990 (which he won), his editors excluded from the parcel of articles sent to the judges Shaw's most conspicuous work of that year—his exhaustive series, nine months in the making, on how the media report abortion, in which he demonstrated the media's huge prochoice bias. Apparently there were those on the judges' panel whom the editors didn't dare risk offending. As for the content of Ms. Quindlen's work, the best witness to that is Ms. Qundlen's most recent prize: the first annual Margaret Sanger award, given her by Planned Parenhood—and richly deserved.

KENNETH L. WOODWARD

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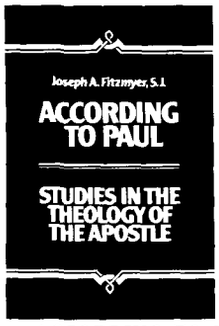

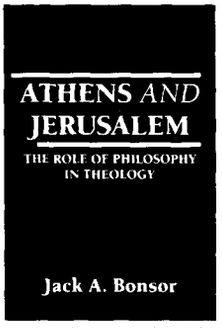

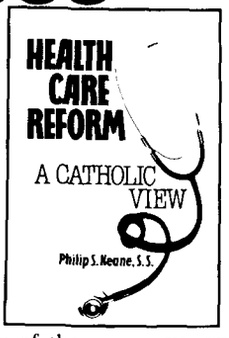

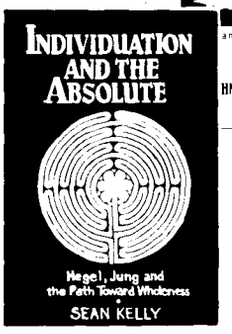

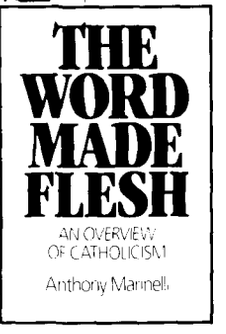

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